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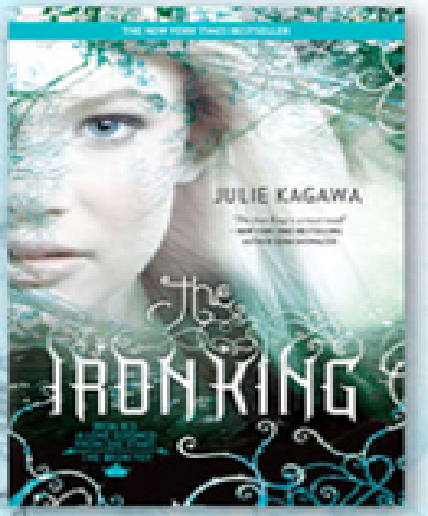
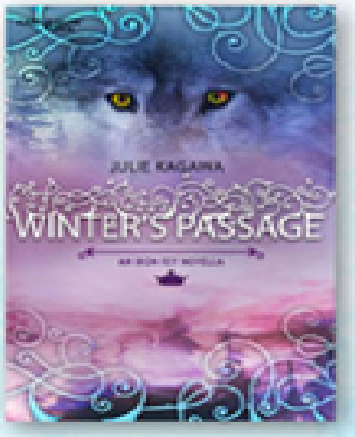
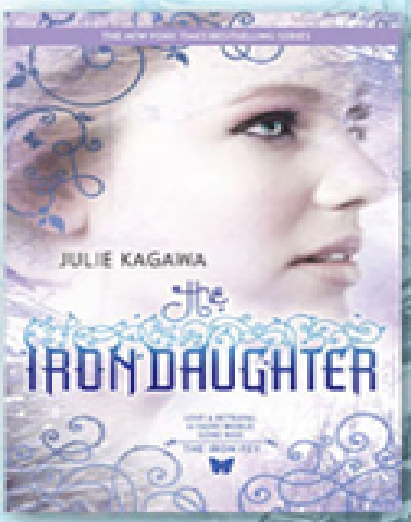
JULIE KAGAWA

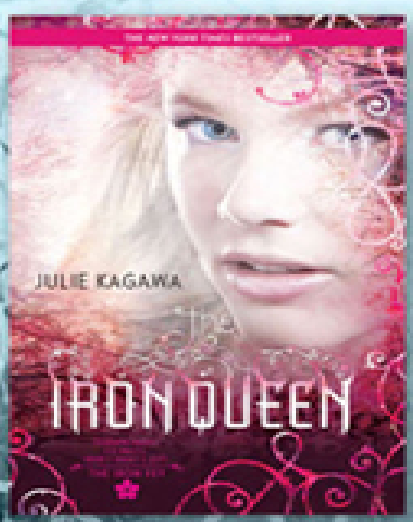
The IRON FEY

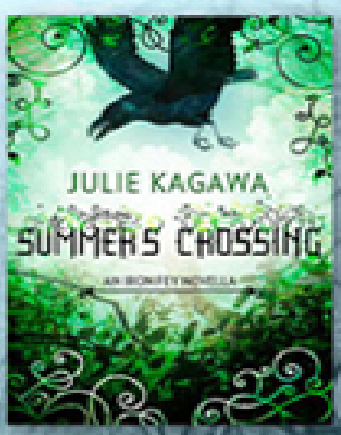
BOX SET
VOLUME ONE











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The *New York Times* bestselling Iron Fey series is now available in two digital box sets! In Box Set One, the first three full-length Iron Fey novels and two companion novellas begin a thrillingly romantic and action-filled fantasy adventure.

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THE IRON FEY SERIES
VOLUME 1

THE IRON KING
WINTER'S PASSAGE
THE IRON DAUGHTER
THE IRON QUEEN
SUMMER'S CROSSING

Julie Kagawa

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THE IRON KING

Julie Kagawa

“Let go!” I screamed, jerking my arm free and trying to claw the prince’s eyes. “My brother is out there! I have to save him!”

“You don’t even know where he is.” Ash caught my flailing wrist and pinned it to his chest. Silver eyes glared into mine as he shook me, once. “Listen to me! If you go charging out there without a plan, you’ll kill us all, and your brother will die. Is that what you want?”

“No,” I whispered, all the fight going out of me. With a shaky breath, I straightened and wiped my eyes. “Sorry,” I said, embarrassed. “I’m okay now. No more freaking out, I promise.”

Ash still held my hand. Gently I tried pulling back, but he wasn’t letting go. I glanced up, and found his face inches from mine. My heart stumbled a bit, then picked up, louder and faster than before. The prince’s expression was blank; nothing showed on his face or in his eyes, but his body had gone very still.

I licked my lips and whispered, “Is this where you say you’ll kill me?”

One corner of his lip curled. “If you like,” he murmured, a flicker of amusement crossing his face. “Though it’s gotten far too interesting for that.”

For Nick, Brandon and Villis. May we continue
to beat those dead horses into the ground.

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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

The Ghost in the Computer

Ten years ago, on my sixth birthday, my father disappeared.

No, he didn't leave. Leaving would imply suitcases and empty drawers, and late birthday cards with ten-dollar bills stuffed inside. Leaving would imply he was unhappy with Mom and me, or that he found a new love elsewhere. None of that was true. He also did not die, because we would've heard about it. There was no car crash, no body, no police mingling about the scene of a brutal murder. It all happened very quietly.

On my sixth birthday, my father took me to the park, one of my favorite places to go at that time. It was a lonely little park in the middle of nowhere, with a running trail and a misty green pond surrounded by pine trees. We were at the edge of the pond, feeding the ducks, when I heard the jingle of an ice cream truck in the parking lot over the hill. When I begged my dad to get me a Creamsicle, he laughed, handed me a few bills, and sent me after the truck.

That was the last time I saw him.

Later, when the police searched the area, they discovered his shoes at the edge of the water, but nothing else. They sent divers into the pond, but it was barely ten feet down, and they found nothing but branches and mud at the bottom. My father had disappeared without a trace.

For months afterward, I had a recurring nightmare about standing at the top of that hill, looking down and seeing my father walk into the pond. As the water closed over his head, I could hear the ice cream truck singing in the background, a slow, eerie song with words I could almost understand. Every time I tried to listen to them, however, I'd wake up.

Not long after my father's disappearance, Mom moved us far away, to a tiny little hick town in the middle of the Louisiana bayou. Mom said she wanted to "start over," but I always knew, deep down, that she was running from something.

It would be another ten years before I discovered what.

* * *

MY NAME IS MEGHAN CHASE.

In less than twenty-four hours, I'll be sixteen years old.

Sweet sixteen. It has a magical ring to it. Sixteen is supposed to be the age when girls become princesses and fall in love and go to dances and proms and such. Countless stories, songs, and poems have been written about this wonderful age, when a girl finds true love and the stars shine for her and the handsome prince carries her off into the sunset.

I didn't think it would be that way for me.

The morning before my birthday, I woke up, showered, and rummaged through my dresser for something to wear. Normally, I'd just grab whatever clean-ish thing is on the floor, but today was special. Today was the day Scott Waldron would finally notice me. I wanted to look perfect. Of course, my wardrobe is sadly lacking in the popular-attire department. While other girls spend hours in front of their closets crying, "What should I wear?" my drawers basically hold three things: clothes from Goodwill, hand-me-downs, and overalls.

I wish we weren't so poor. I know pig farming isn't the most glamorous of jobs, but you'd think Mom could afford to buy me at least one pair of nice jeans. I glared at my scanty wardrobe in disgust. *Oh, well, I guess Scott will have to be wowed with my natural grace and charm, if I don't make an idiot of myself in front of him.*

I finally slipped into cargo pants, a neutral green T-shirt, and my only pair of ratty sneakers, before dragging a brush through my white-blond hair. My hair is straight and very fine, and was doing that stupid floating thing again, where it looked like I'd jammed my finger up an electrical outlet. Yanking it into a ponytail, I went downstairs.

Luke, my stepfather, sat at the table, drinking coffee and leafing through the town's tiny newspaper, which reads more like our high school gossip column than a real news source. "Five-legged calf born on Patterson's farm," the front page screamed; you get the idea. Ethan, my four-year-old half brother, sat on his father's lap, eating a Pop-Tart and getting crumbs all over Luke's overalls. He clutched Floppy, his favorite stuffed rabbit, in one arm and occasionally tried to feed it his breakfast; the rabbit's face was full of crumbs and fruit filling.

Ethan is a good kid. He has his father's curly brown hair, but like me, inherited Mom's big blue eyes. He's the type of kid old ladies stop to coo at, and total strangers smile and wave at him from across the street. Mom and Luke dote on their baby, but it doesn't seem to spoil him, thank goodness.

"Where's Mom?" I asked as I entered the kitchen. Opening the cabinet doors, I scoured the boxes of cereal for the one I liked, wondering if Mom remembered to pick it up. Of course she hadn't. Nothing but fiber squares and disgusting marshmallow cereals for Ethan. Was it so hard to remember Cheerios?

Luke ignored me and sipped his coffee. Ethan chewed his Pop-Tart and sneezed on his father's arm. I slammed the cabinet doors with a satisfying bang.

"Where's Mom?" I asked, a bit louder this time. Luke jerked his head up and finally looked at me. His lazy brown eyes, like those of a cow, registered mild surprise.

"Oh, hello, Meg," he said calmly. "I didn't hear you come in. What did you say?"

I sighed and repeated my question for the third time.

"She had a meeting with some of the ladies at church," Luke murmured, turning back to his paper. "She won't be back for a few hours, so you'll have to take the bus."

I always took the bus. I just wanted to remind Mom that she was supposed to take me to get a learner's permit this weekend. With Luke, it was hopeless. I could tell him something fourteen different times, and he'd forget it the moment I left the room. It wasn't that Luke was mean or malicious, or even stupid. He adored Ethan, and Mom seemed truly happy with him. But, every time I spoke to my stepdad, he would look at me with genuine surprise, as if he'd forgotten I lived here, too.

I grabbed a bagel from the top of the fridge and chewed it sullenly, keeping an eye on the clock. Beau, our German shepherd, wandered in and put his big head on my knee. I scratched him behind the ears and he groaned. At least the *dog* appreciated me.

Luke stood, gently placing Ethan back in his seat. "All right, big guy," he said, kissing the top of Ethan's head. "Dad has to fix the bathroom sink, so you sit there and be good. When I'm done, we'll go feed the pigs, okay?"

"'Kay," Ethan chirped, swinging his chubby legs. "Floppy wants to see if Ms. Daisy had her babies yet."

Luke's smile was so disgustingly proud, I felt nauseous.

"Hey, Luke," I said as he turned to go, "bet you can't guess what tomorrow is."

"Mmm?" He didn't even turn around. "I don't know, Meg. If you have plans for tomorrow, talk to your mother." He snapped his fingers, and Beau immediately left me to follow him. Their footsteps faded up the stairs, and I was alone with my half brother.

Ethan kicked his feet, regarding me in that solemn way of his. "I know," he announced softly, putting his Pop-Tart on the table. "Tomorrow's your birthday, isn't it? Floppy told me, and I remembered."

"Yeah," I muttered, turning and lobbing the bagel into the trash can. It hit the wall with a thump and dropped inside, leaving a greasy smear on the paint. I smirked and decided to leave it.

"Floppy says to tell you happy early birthday."

"Tell Floppy thanks." I ruffled Ethan's hair as I left the kitchen, my mood completely soured. I knew it. Mom and Luke would completely forget my birthday tomorrow. I wouldn't get a card, or a cake, or even a "happy birthday" from anyone. Except my kid brother's stupid stuffed rabbit. How pathetic was that?

Back in my room, I grabbed books, homework, gym clothes, and the iPod I'd spent a year saving for, despite Luke's disdain of those "useless, brain-numbing gadgets." In true hick fashion, my stepfather dislikes and distrusts anything that could make life easier. Cell phones? No way, we've got a perfectly good landline. Video games? They're the devil's tools, turning kids into delinquents and serial killers. I've begged Mom over and over to buy me a laptop for school, but Luke insists that if his ancient, clunky PC is good enough for him, it's good enough for the family. Never mind that dial-up takes flipping *forever.* I mean, who uses dial-up anymore?

I checked my watch and swore. The bus would arrive shortly, and I had a good ten-minute walk to the main road. Looking out the window, I saw the sky was gray and heavy with rain, so I grabbed a jacket, as well. And, not for the first time, I wished we lived closer to town.

I swear, when I get a license and a car, I am never coming back to this place.

“Meggie?” Ethan hovered in the doorway, clutching his rabbit under his chin. His blue eyes regarded me somberly. “Can I go with you today?”

“What?” Shrugging into my jacket, I gazed around for my backpack. “No, Ethan. I’m going to school now. Big-kids school, no rug rats allowed.”

I turned away, only to feel two small arms wrap around my leg. Putting my hand against the wall to avoid falling, I glared down at my half brother. Ethan clung to me doggedly, his face tilted up to mine, his jaw set. “Please?” he begged. “I’ll be good, I promise. Take me with you? Just for today?”

With a sigh, I bent down and picked him up.

“What’s up, squirt?” I asked, brushing his hair out of his eyes. Mom would need to cut it soon; it was starting to look like a bird’s nest. “You’re awfully clingy this morning. What’s going on?”

“Scared,” Ethan muttered, burying his face in my neck.

“You’re scared?”

He shook his head. “Floppy’s scared.”

“What’s Floppy scared of?”

“The man in the closet.”

I felt a small chill slide up my back. Sometimes, Ethan was so quiet and serious, it was hard to remember he was only four. He still had childish fears of monsters under his bed and bogeymen in his closet. In Ethan’s world, stuffed animals spoke to him, invisible men waved to him from the bushes, and scary creatures tapped long nails against his bedroom window. He rarely went to Mom or Luke with stories of monsters and bogeymen; from the time he was old enough to walk, he always came to me.

I sighed, knowing he wanted me to go upstairs and check, to reassure him that nothing lurked in his closet or under his bed. I kept a flashlight on his dresser for that very reason.

Outside, lightning flickered, and thunder rumbled in the distance. I winced. My walk to the bus was not going to be pleasant.

Dammit, I don’t have time for this.

Ethan pulled back and looked at me, eyes pleading. I sighed again. “Fine,” I muttered, putting him down. “Let’s go check for monsters.”

He followed me silently up the stairs, watching anxiously as I grabbed the flashlight and got down on my knees, shining it under the bed. “No

monsters there," I announced, standing up. I walked to the closet door and flung it open as Ethan peeked out from behind my legs. "No monsters here, either. Think you'll be all right now?"

He nodded and gave me a faint smile. I started to close the door when I noticed a strange gray hat in the corner. It was domed on top, with a circular rim and a red band around the base: a bowler hat.

Weird. Why would that be there?

As I straightened and started to turn around, something moved out of the corner of my eye. I caught a glimpse of a figure hiding behind Ethan's bedroom door, its pale eyes watching me through the crack. I jerked my head around, but of course there was nothing there.

Jeez, now Ethan's got me *seeing imaginary monsters. I need to stop watching those late-night horror flicks.*

A thunderous boom directly overhead made me jump, and fat drops plinked against the windowpanes. Rushing past Ethan, I burst out of the house and sprinted down the driveway.

* * *

I WAS SOAKED WHEN I REACHED the bus stop. The late spring rain wasn't frigid, but it was cold enough to be uncomfortable. I crossed my arms and huddled under a mossy cypress, waiting for the bus to arrive.

Wonder where Robbie is? I mused, gazing down the road. *He's usually here by now. Maybe he didn't feel like getting drenched and stayed home.* I snorted and rolled my eyes. *Skipping class again, huh? Slacker. Wish I could do that.*

If only I had a car. I knew kids whose parents gave *them* cars for their sixteenth birthday. Me, I'd be lucky if I got a cake. Most of my classmates already had licenses and could drive themselves to clubs and parties and anywhere they wanted. I was always left behind, the backward hick girl nobody wanted to invite.

Except Robbie, I amended with a small mental shrug. *At least Robbie will remember. Wonder what kooky thing he has planned for my birthday tomorrow?* I could almost guarantee it would be something strange or crazy. Last year, he snuck me out of the house for a midnight picnic in the woods. It was weird; I remembered the glen and the little pond with the

fireflies drifting over it, but though I explored the woods behind my house countless times since then, I never found it again.

Something rustled in the bushes behind me. A possum or a deer, or even a fox, seeking shelter from the rain. The wildlife out here was stupidly bold and had little fear of humans. If it wasn't for Beau, Mom's vegetable garden would be a buffet for rabbits and deer, and the local raccoon family would help themselves to everything in our cupboards.

A branch snapped in the trees, closer this time. I shifted uncomfortably, determined not to turn around for some stupid squirrel or raccoon. I'm not like "inflate-a-boob" Angie, Ms. Perfect Cheerleader, who'd flip out if she saw a caged gerbil or a speck of dirt on her Hollister jeans. I've pitched hay and killed rats and driven pigs through knee-deep mud. Wild animals don't scare me.

Still, I stared down the road, hoping to see the bus turn the corner. Maybe it was the rain and my own sick imagination, but the woods felt like the set for *The Blair Witch Project.*

There are no wolves or serial killers out here, I told myself. *Stop being paranoid.*

The forest was suddenly very quiet. I leaned against the tree and shivered, trying to will the bus into appearing. A chill crawled up my back. I wasn't alone. Cautiously, I craned my neck up, peering through the leaves. An enormous black bird perched on a branch, feathers spiked out against the rain, sitting as motionless as a statue. As I watched, it turned its head and met my gaze, with eyes as green as colored glass.

And then, something reached around the tree and grabbed me.

I screamed and leaped away, my heart hammering in my ears. Whirling around, I tensed to run, my mind filled with rapists and murderers and Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.*

Laughter exploded behind me.

Robbie Goodfell, my closest neighbor—meaning he lived nearly two miles away—slouched against the tree trunk, gasping with mirth. Lanky and tall, in tattered jeans and an old T-shirt, he paused to look at my pale face, before cracking up again. His spiky red hair lay plastered to his forehead and his clothes clung to his skin, emphasizing his lean, bony frame, as though his limbs didn't fit quite right. Being drenched and covered in twigs, leaves, and mud didn't seem to bother him. Few things did.

“Dammit, Robbie!” I raged, stomping up and aiming a kick at him. He dodged and staggered into the road, his face red from laughter. “That wasn’t funny, you idiot. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“S-sorry, princess,” Robbie gasped, clutching his heart as he sucked in air. “It was just too perfect.” He gave a final chortle and straightened, holding his ribs. “Man, that was impressive. You must’ve jumped three feet in the air. What, did you think I was, Leatherface or something?”

“Of course not, stupid.” I turned away with a huff to hide my burning face. “And I told you to stop calling me that! I’m not ten anymore.”

“Sure thing, princess.”

I rolled my eyes. “Has anyone told you you have the maturity level of a four-year-old?”

He laughed cheerfully. “Look who’s talking. I’m not the one who stayed up all night with the lights on after watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. I tried to warn you.” He made a grotesque face and staggered toward me, arms outstretched. “Ooooh, look out, it’s Leatherface.”

I scowled and kicked water at him. He kicked some back, laughing. By the time the bus showed up a few minutes later, we were both covered in mud, dripping wet, and the bus driver told us to sit in the back.

“What are you doing after school?” Robbie asked as we huddled in the far backseat. Around us, students talked, joked, laughed, and generally paid us no attention. “Wanna grab a coffee later? Or we could sneak into the theater and see a movie.”

“Not today, Rob,” I replied, trying to wring water from my shirt. Now that it was over, I dearly regretted our little mud battle. I was going to look like the Creature from the Black Lagoon in front of Scott. “You’ll have to do your sneaking without me this time. I’m tutoring someone after class.”

Robbie’s green eyes narrowed. “Tutoring someone? Who?”

My stomach fluttered, and I tried not to grin. “Scott Waldron.”

“What?” Robbie’s lip curled in a grimace of disgust. “The jockstrap? Why, does he need you to teach him how to read?”

I scowled at him. “Just because he’s captain of the football team doesn’t mean you can be a jerk. Or are you jealous?”

“Oh, of course, that’s it,” Robbie said with a sneer. “I’ve always wanted the IQ of a rock. No, wait. That would be an insult to the rock.” He snorted. “I can’t believe you’re going for the jockstrap. You can do so much better, princess.”

“Don’t call me that.” I turned away to hide my burning face. “And it’s just a tutoring session. He’s not going to ask me to the prom. Jeez.”

“Right.” Robbie sounded unconvinced. “He’s not, but you’re *hoping* he will. Admit it. You’re drooling over him just like every empty-headed cheerleader on campus.”

“So what if I am?” I snapped, spinning around. “It’s none of your business, Rob. What do you care, anyway?”

He got very quiet, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. I turned my back on him and stared out the window. I didn’t care what Robbie said. This afternoon, for one glorious hour, Scott Waldron would be mine alone, and no one would distract me from that.

* * *

SCHOOL DRAGGED. THE TEACHERS all spoke gibberish, and the clocks seemed to be moving backward. The afternoon crept by in a daze. Finally, finally, the last bell rang, freeing me from the endless torture of X equals Y problems.

Today is the day, I told myself as I maneuvered the crowded hallways, keeping to the edge of the teeming mass. Wet sneakers squeaked over tile, and a miasma of sweat, smoke, and body odor hung thick in the air. Nervousness fluttered inside me. *You can do this. Don’t think about it. Just go in and get it over with.*

Dodging students, I wove my way down the hall and peeked into the computer room.

There he was, sitting at one of the desks with both feet up on another chair. Scott Waldron, captain of the football team. Gorgeous Scott. King-of-the-school Scott. He wore a red-and-white letterman jacket that showed off his broad chest, and his thick dark blond hair brushed the top of his collar.

My heart pounded. *A whole hour in the same room with Scott Waldron, with no one to get in the way.* Normally, I couldn’t even get close to Scott; he was either surrounded by Angie and her cheerleader groupies, or his football buddies. There were other students in the computer lab with us, but they were nerds and academic types, beneath Scott Waldron’s notice. The jocks and cheerleaders wouldn’t be caught dead in here if they could help it. I took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

He didn't glance at me when I walked up beside him. He lounged in the chair with his feet up and his head back, tossing an invisible ball across the room. I cleared my throat. Nothing. I cleared it a little louder. Still nothing.

Gathering my courage, I stepped in front of him and waved. His coffee-brown eyes finally jerked up to mine. For a moment, he looked startled. Then an eyebrow rose in a lazy arc, as if he couldn't figure out why I wanted to talk to him.

Uh-oh. Say something, Meg. Something intelligent.

"Um…" I stammered. "Hi. I'm Meghan. I sit behind you. In computer class." He was still giving me that blank stare, and I felt my cheeks getting hot. "Uh…I really don't watch a lot of sports, but I think you're an awesome quarterback, not that I've seen many—well, just you, actually. But you really seem to know what you're doing. I go to all your games, you know. I'm usually in the very back, so you probably don't see me." *Oh, God. Shut up, Meg. Shut up now.* I clamped my mouth closed to stop the incessant babbling, wanting to crawl into a hole and die. What was I thinking, agreeing to this? Better to be invisible than to look like a complete and total moron, especially in front of Scott.

He blinked lazily, reached up, and pulled the earphones from his ears. "Sorry, babe," he drawled in that wonderful, deep voice of his. "I couldn't hear you." He gave me a once-over and smirked. "Are you supposed to be the tutor?"

"Um, yes." I straightened and smoothed out my remaining shreds of dignity. "I'm Meghan. Mr. Sanders asked me to help you out with your programming project."

He continued to smirk at me. "Aren't you that hick girl who lives out in the swamp? Do you even know what a computer is?"

My face flamed, and my stomach contracted into a tight little ball. Okay, so I didn't have a great computer at home. That was why I spent most of my after-school time here, in the lab, doing homework or just surfing online. In fact, I was hoping to make it into ITT Tech in a couple of years. Programming and Web design came easily to me. I knew how to work a computer, dammit.

But, in the face of Scott's criticism, I could only stammer: "Y-yes, I do. I mean, I know a lot." He gave me a dubious look, and I felt the sting of wounded pride. I had to prove to him that I wasn't the backward

hillbilly he thought I was. “Here, I’ll show you,” I offered, and reached toward the keyboard on the table.

Then something weird happened.

I hadn’t even touched the keys when the computer screen blipped on. When I paused, my fingers hovering over the board, words began to scroll across the blue screen.

Meghan Chase. We see you. We’re coming for you.

I froze. The words continued, those three sentences, over and over. *Meghan Chase. We see you. We’re coming for you. Meghan Chase we see you we’re coming for you. Meghan Chase we see you we’re coming for you.*… over and over until it completely filled the screen.

Scott leaned back in his seat, glaring at me, then at the computer. “What is this?” he asked, scowling. “What the hell are you doing, freak?” Pushing him aside, I shook the mouse, punched Escape, and pressed Ctrl/Alt/Del to stop the endless string of words. Nothing worked.

Suddenly, without warning, the words stopped, and the screen went blank for a moment. Then, in giant letters, another message flashed into view.

SCOTT WALDRON PEEKS AT GUYS IN THE SHOWER ROOM, ROFL.

I gasped. The message began to scroll across all the computer screens, wending its way around the room, with me powerless to stop it. The other students at the desks paused, shocked for a moment, then began to point and laugh.

I could feel Scott’s gaze like a knife in my back. Fearfully, I turned to find him glaring at me, chest heaving. His face was crimson, probably from rage or embarrassment, and he jabbed a finger in my direction.

“You think that’s funny, swamp girl? Do you? Just wait. I’ll show you funny. You just dug your own grave, bitch.”

He stormed out of the room with the echo of laughter trailing behind him. A few of the students gave me grins, applause, and thumbs-up; one of them even winked at me.

My knees were shaking. I dropped into a chair and stared blankly at the computer screen, which suddenly flicked off, taking the offensive message with it, but the damage was already done. My stomach roiled, and there was a stinging sensation behind my eyes.

I buried my face in my hands. *I'm dead. I'm so dead. That's it, game over, Meghan. I wonder if Mom will let me move to a boarding school in Canada?*

A faint snicker cut through my bleak thoughts, and I raised my head.

Crouched atop the monitor, silhouetted black against the open window, was a tiny, misshapen *thing.* Spindly and emaciated, it had long, thin arms and huge batlike ears. Slitted green eyes regarded me across the table, gleaming with intelligence. It grinned, showing off a mouthful of pointed teeth that glowed with neon-blue light, before it vanished, like an image on the computer screen.

I sat there a moment, staring at the spot where the creature had been, my mind spinning in a dozen directions at once. *Okay. Great. Not only does Scott hate me, I'm starting to hallucinate, as well. Meghan Chase, victim of a nervous breakdown the day before she turned sixteen. Just send me off to the loony bin, 'cause I sure won't survive another day at school.*

Dragging myself upright, I shuffled, zombielike, into the hall.

Robbie waited for me by the lockers, a soda bottle in each hand. "Hey, princess," he greeted as I shambled past. "You're out early. How'd the tutoring session go?"

"Don't call me that," I muttered, banging my forehead into my locker. "And the tutoring session went fabulous. Please kill me now."

"That good, huh?" He tossed me a diet soda, which I barely caught, and twisted open his root beer in a hiss of foam. I could hear the grin in his voice. "Well, I suppose I could say 'I told you so—'"

I glared daggers at him, daring him to continue.

The smile vanished from his face. "—but…I won't." He pursed his lips, trying not to grin. "'Cause…that would just be wrong."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I demanded. "The buses have all left by now. Were you *lurking* by the computer lab, like some creepy stalker guy?"

Rob coughed loudly and took a long sip of his root beer. "Hey, I was wondering," he continued brightly, "what are you doing for your birthday tomorrow?"

Hiding in my room, with the covers over my head, I thought, but shrugged and yanked open my rusty locker. "I dunno. Whatever. I don't have anything planned." I grabbed my books, stuffed them in my bag, and slammed the locker door. "Why?"

Robbie gave me that smile that always makes me nervous, a grin that stretched his entire face so that his eyes narrowed to green slits. “I’ve got a bottle of champagne I managed to swipe from the wine cabinet,” he said in a low voice, waggling his eyebrows. “How ’bout I come by your place tomorrow? We can celebrate your birthday in style.”

I’d never had champagne. I did try a sip of Luke’s beer once, and thought I was going to throw up. Mom sometimes brought home wine in a box, and that wasn’t terrible, but I wasn’t much of an alcohol drinker.

What the hell? You’re only sixteen once, right? “Sure,” I told Robbie, and gave a resigned shrug. “Sounds good. Might as well go out with a bang.”

He cocked his head at me. “You okay, princess?”

What could I tell him? That the captain of the football team, whom I’d been crushing on for two years, was out to get me, that I was seeing monsters at every turn, and that the school computers were either hacked or possessed? Yeah, right. I’d get no sympathy from the school’s greatest prankster. Knowing Robbie, he’d think it was a brilliant joke and congratulate me. If I didn’t know him better, I might even think he set it up.

I just gave him a tired smile and nodded. “I’m fine. I’ll see you tomorrow, Robbie.”

“See you then, princess.”

Mom was late picking me up, again. The tutoring session was only supposed to be an hour, but I sat on the curb, in the drizzling rain, for another good half hour, contemplating my miserable life and watching cars pull in and out of the parking lot. Finally, her blue station wagon turned the corner and pulled to a stop in front of me. The front seat was filled with grocery bags and newspapers, so I slid into the back.

“Meg, you’re sopping wet,” cried my mother, watching me from the rearview mirror. “Don’t sit on the upholstery—get a towel or something. Didn’t you bring an umbrella?”

Nice to see you, too, Mom, I thought, scowling as I grabbed a newspaper off the floor to put on the seat. No “how was your day?” or “sorry I’m late.” I should’ve abandoned the stupid tutoring session with Scott and taken the bus home.

We drove in silence. People used to tell me I looked like her, that is, before Ethan came along and swallowed up the spotlight. To this day, I

don’t know where they saw the resemblance. Mom is one of those ladies who looks natural in a three-piece suit and heels; me, I like baggy cargo pants and sneakers. Mom’s hair hangs in thick golden ringlets; mine is limp and fine, almost silver if it catches the light just right. She looks regal and graceful and slender; I just look skinny.

Mom could’ve married anyone in the world—a movie star, a rich business tycoon—but she chose Luke the pig farmer and a shabby little farm out in the sticks. Which reminded me…

“Hey, Mom. Don’t forget, you have to take me to get a permit this weekend.”

“Oh, Meg.” Mom sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve got a lot of work this week, and your father wants me to help him fix the barn. Maybe next week.”

“Mom, you promised!”

“Meghan, please. I’ve had a long day.” Mom sighed again and looked back at me in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and ringed with smeared mascara. I shifted uncomfortably. Had Mom been crying?

“What’s up?” I asked cautiously.

She hesitated. “There was an…accident at home,” she began, and her voice made my insides squirm. “Your father had to take Ethan to the hospital this afternoon.” She paused again, blinking rapidly, and took a short breath. “Beau attacked him.”

“What?” My outburst made her start. *Our* German shepherd? Attacking Ethan? “Is Ethan all right?” I demanded, feeling my stomach twist in fear.

“Yes.” Mom gave me a tired smile. “Very shaken up, but nothing serious, thank God.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “What happened?” I asked, still unable to believe our dog actually attacked a family member. Beau adored Ethan; he got upset if anyone even scolded my half brother. I’d seen Ethan yanking on Beau’s fur, ears, and tail, and the dog barely responded with a lick. I’d seen Beau take Ethan’s sleeve and gently tug him back from the driveway. Our German shepherd might be a terror to squirrels and deer, but he’d never even shown teeth to anyone in the house. “Why did Beau go crazy like that?”

Mom shook her head. “I don’t know. Luke saw Beau run up the stairs, then heard Ethan screaming. When he got to his room, he found the dog

dragging Ethan across the floor. His face was badly scratched, and there were bite marks on his arm."

My blood ran cold. I saw Ethan being mauled, imagined his absolute terror when our previously trustworthy shepherd turned on him. It was so hard to believe, like something out of a horror movie. I knew Mom was just as stunned as I was; she'd trusted Beau completely.

Still, Mom was holding back, I could tell by the way she pressed her lips together. There was something she wasn't telling me, and I was afraid I knew what it was.

"What will happen to Beau?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and my heart sank. "We can't have a dangerous dog running around, Meg," she said, and I heard the plea for understanding. "If Ethan asks, tell him that we found Beau another home." She took a deep breath and gripped the steering wheel tightly, not looking at me. "It's for the safety of the family, Meghan. Don't blame your father. But, after Luke brought Ethan home, he took Beau to the pound."

CHAPTER TWO

Ring Tone of Doom

Dinner was tense that night. I was furious at both my parents: Luke for doing the deed, and Mom for allowing him to do it. I refused to speak to either of them. Mom and Luke talked between themselves about useless, trivial stuff, and Ethan sat clutching Floppy in silence. It was weird not having Beau pacing round the table like he always did, looking for crumbs. I excused myself early and retreated to my room, slamming the door behind me.

I flopped back on my bed, remembering all the times Beau had curled up here with me, a solid, warm presence. He never asked anyone for anything, content just to be near, making sure his charges were safe. Now he was gone, and the house seemed emptier for it.

I wished I could talk to someone. I wanted to call Robbie and rant about the total unfairness of it all, but his parents—who were even more backward than mine, apparently—didn't have a phone, or even a computer. Talk about living in the Dark Ages. Rob and I made our plans at school, or sometimes he would just show up outside my window, having walked the two miles to my house. It was a total pain in the ass, something I fully intended to fix once I got my own car. Mom and Luke couldn't keep me in this isolated bubble forever. Maybe my next big purchase would be cell phones for *both* of us, and screw what Luke thought about that. This whole "technology is evil" thing was getting really old.

I'd talk to Robbie tomorrow. I couldn't do it tonight. Besides, the only phone in my house was the landline in the kitchen, and I didn't want to vent about grown-up stupidity with them in the same room. That would be pushing it.

There was a timid knock on the door, and Ethan's head peeked inside.

"Hey, squirt." I sat up on the bed, swiping at a few stray tears. A dinosaur Band-Aid covered his forehead, and his right arm was wrapped in gauze. "What's up?"

“Mommy and Daddy sent Beau away.” His lower lip trembled, and he hiccuped, wiping his eyes on Floppy’s fur. I sighed and patted the bed.

“They had to,” I explained as he clambered up and snuggled into my lap, rabbit and all. “They didn’t want Beau to bite you again. They were afraid you’d get hurt.”

“Beau didn’t bite me.” Ethan gazed back at me with wide, teary eyes. I saw fear in them, and an understanding that went way beyond his years. “Beau didn’t hurt me,” he insisted. “Beau was trying to save me from the man in the closet.”

Monsters again? I sighed, wanting to dismiss it, but a part of me hesitated. What if Ethan was right? I’d been seeing weird things, too, lately. What if…what if Beau really was protecting Ethan from something horrible and terrifying…?

No! I shook my head. This was ridiculous! I’d be turning sixteen in a few hours; that was way too old to believe in monsters. And it was high time Ethan grew up, as well. He was a smart kid, and I was getting tired of him blaming imaginary bogeymen whenever something went wrong.

“Ethan.” I sighed again, trying not to appear cranky. If I was too harsh, he’d probably start bawling, and I didn’t want to upset him after all he’d gone through today. Still, this had gone far enough. “There are no monsters in your closet, Ethan. There’s no such thing as monsters, okay?”

“Yes, there are!” He scowled and kicked his feet into the covers. “I’ve seen them. They talk to me. They say the king wants to see me.” He held out his arm, showing me the bandage. “The man in the closet grabbed me here. He was pulling me under the bed when Beau came in and scared him off.”

Clearly, I wasn’t going to change his mind. And I really didn’t want a temper tantrum in my room right now. “Okay, fine,” I relented, wrapping my arms around him. “Let’s say something other than Beau grabbed you today. Why don’t you tell Mom and Luke?”

“They’re grown-ups,” Ethan said, as if it was perfectly clear. “They won’t believe me. They can’t see the monsters.” He sighed and looked at me with the gravest expression I’d ever seen on a kid. “But Floppy says *you* can see them. If you try hard enough. You can see through the Mist and the glamour, Floppy says so.”

“The what and the what?”

“Ethan?” Mom’s voice floated outside the door, and her silhouette appeared in the frame. “Are you in here?” Seeing us together, she blinked and offered a tentative smile. I glared back stonily.

Mom ignored me. “Ethan, honey, time to get ready for bed. It’s been a long day.” She held out her hand, and Ethan hopped down to pad across the room, dragging his rabbit behind him.

“Can I sleep with you and Daddy?” I heard him ask, his voice small and scared.

“Oh, I guess so. Just for tonight, okay?”

“’Kay.” Their voices faded away down the hall, and I kicked my door shut.

That night, I had a strange dream about waking up and seeing Floppy, Ethan’s stuffed rabbit, at the foot of my bed. In the dream, the rabbit was speaking to me, words that were grave and terrifying, filled with danger. It wanted to warn me, or it wanted me to help. I might have promised it something. The next morning, however, I couldn’t remember much of the dream at all.

* * *

I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF RAIN drumming on the roof. My birthday seemed destined to be cold, ugly, and wet. For a moment, a heavy weight pressed at the back of my mind, though I didn’t know why I felt so depressed. Then everything from the previous day came back to me, and I groaned.

Happy birthday to me, I thought, burrowing under the covers. *I’ll be spending the rest of the week in bed, thanks.*

“Meghan?” Mom’s voice sounded outside my door, followed by a timid knock. “It’s getting late. Are you up yet?”

I ignored her and curled up farther into the covers. Resentment simmered as I thought of poor Beau, carted off to the pound. Mom knew I was mad at her, but she could stew in her guilt for a while. I wasn’t ready to forgive and make up just yet.

“Meghan, get up. You’re going to miss the bus,” said Mom, poking her head in the room. Her tone was matter-of-fact, and I snorted. So much for making up.

“I’m not going to school,” I muttered from beneath the covers. “I don’t feel good. I think I’ve got the flu.”

“Sick? On your birthday? That’s unfortunate.” Mom came into the room, and I peeked at her through a crack in the blankets. She remembered?

“Very sad,” Mom continued, smiling at me and crossing her arms. “I was going to take you to get a learner’s permit after school today, but if you’re sick…”

I popped up. “Really? Um…well, I guess I don’t feel all that bad. I’ll just take some aspirin or something.”

“I thought so.” Mom shook her head as I bounced to my feet. “I’m helping your father fix the barn this afternoon, so I can’t pick you up. But, as soon as you get home, we’ll go to the license bureau together. That sound like a good birthday present?”

I barely heard her. I was too busy racing around the room, grabbing clothes and getting my stuff together. The sooner I got through the day, the better.

I was stuffing homework into my backpack when the door creaked open again. Ethan peeked in the doorway, his hands behind his back, a shy, expectant smile on his face.

I blinked at him and pushed back my hair. “What do you need, squirt?”

With a grin, he stepped forward and held out a folded piece of paper. Bright crayon drawings decorated the front; a smiley-faced sun hovered over a little house with smoke curling from the chimney.

“Happy birthday, Meggie,” he said, quite pleased with himself. “See how I remembered?”

Smiling, I took the homemade card and opened it. Inside, a simple crayon drawing of our family smiled back: stick figures of Mom and Luke, me and Ethan holding hands, and a four-legged critter that had to be Beau. I felt a lump in my throat, and my eyes watered for just a moment.

“You like it?” Ethan asked, watching me anxiously.

“I love it,” I said, ruffling his hair. “Thank you. Here, why don’t you put it on the fridge, so everyone can see what a great artist you are.”

He grinned and scampered off, clutching the card, and I felt my heart get a little bit lighter. Maybe today wouldn’t be so terrible, after all.

* * *

“SO, YOUR MOM IS TAKING YOU to get a permit today?” Robbie asked as the bus pulled into the school parking lot. “That’s cool. You can finally drive us downtown and to the movies. We won’t have to depend on the bus, or spend another evening watching VHS tapes on your twelve-inch screen.”

“It’s only a permit, Rob.” I gathered my backpack as the bus lurched to a halt. “I won’t have my license yet. Knowing Mom, it’ll be another sixteen years before I can drive the car on my own. Ethan will probably get a license before I do.”

The thought of my half brother sent an unexpected chill through me. I remembered his words from the night before: *You can see through the Mist and the glamour, Floppy says so.*

Stuffed rabbit aside, I had no idea what he was talking about.

As I walked down the bus steps, a familiar figure broke away from a large group and came striding toward me. Scott. My stomach twisted, and I gazed around for a suitable escape route, but before I could flee into the crowd, he was already in front of me.

“Hey.” His voice, drawling and deep, made me shiver. Terrified as I was, he was still gorgeous, with his damp blond hair falling in unruly waves and curls on his forehead. For some reason, he seemed nervous today, running his hands through his bangs and gazing around. “Um…” He hesitated, narrowing his eyes. “What was your name again?”

“Meghan,” I whispered.

“Oh, yeah.” Stepping closer, he glanced back at his friends and lowered his voice. “Listen, I feel bad about the way I treated you yesterday. It was uncalled-for. I’m sorry.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what he was saying. I’d been expecting threats, taunts, or accusations. Then a great balloon of relief swelled inside me as his words finally registered. “O-oh,” I stammered, feeling my face heat, “that’s okay. Forget about it.”

“I can’t,” he muttered. “You’ve been on my mind since yesterday. I was a real jerk, and I’d like to make it up to you. Do…” He stopped, chewing his lip, then got it all out in a rush. “Do you want to eat lunch with me this afternoon?”

My heart pounded. Butterflies swarmed madly in my stomach, and my feet felt like they were floating an inch off the ground. I barely had the voice to squeak a breathless “Sure.” Scott grinned, showing blindingly white teeth, and gave me a wink.

“Hey, guys! Over here!” One of Scott’s football buddies stood a few feet away, a camera-phone in hand, pointed at us. “Smile for the birdie.”

Before I knew what was happening, Scott put a hand around my shoulders and pulled me close to his side. I blinked up at him, stunned, as my heart began racing around my chest. He flashed his dazzling grin at the camera, but I could only stare, stupefied, like a moron.

“Thanks, Meg,” Scott said, breaking away from me. “See you at lunch.” He smiled and trotted off toward the school with one final wink. The cameraman chuckled and sprinted after him, leaving me dazed and confused at the edge of the parking lot.

For a moment, I stood there, staring like an idiot as my classmates surged around me. Then a grin spread across my face and I whooped, leaping into the air. Scott Waldron wanted to see me! He wanted to have lunch with me, just me, in the cafeteria. Maybe my luck was finally turning around. My best birthday ever might just be starting.

As a silvery curtain of rain crept over the parking lot, I felt eyes on me. Turning, I saw Robbie a few paces away, watching me through the crowd.

Through the rain, his eyes glittered, a too-bright green. As water pounded the concrete and students rushed toward the school, I saw a hint of something on his face: a long muzzle, slitted eyes, a tongue lolling out between pointed fangs. My stomach twisted, but I blinked and Robbie was himself again—normal, grinning, unconcerned that he was getting drenched.

And so was I.

With a little yelp, I sprinted beneath the overhang and ducked inside the school. Robbie followed, laughing, pulling at my limp strands of hair until I smacked him and he stopped.

All through the first class, I kept glancing at Robbie, looking for that eerie, predatory hint on his face, wondering if I was crazy. All it got me was a sore neck and a brusque comment from my English teacher to pay attention and stop staring at boys.

* * *

WHEN THE LUNCH BELL RANG, I leaped up, my heart fluttering a hundred miles a minute. Scott was waiting for me in the cafeteria. I grabbed my books, stuffed them into my backpack, whirled around—

And came face-to-face with Robbie, standing behind me.

I shrieked. “Rob, I’m going to smack you if you don’t stop doing that! Now, move. I have to get somewhere.”

“Don’t go.” His voice was quiet, serious. Surprised, I looked up at him. The perpetual goofy grin was gone, and his jaw was set. The look in his eyes was almost frightening. “This is bad, I can feel it. Jockstrap is up to something—he and his buddies were hanging around the yearbook department for a long time after he talked to you. I don’t like it. Promise me you won’t go.”

I recoiled. “Were you eavesdropping on us?” I demanded, scowling. “What’s wrong with you? Ever hear of a ‘private conversation’?”

“Waldron doesn’t care about you.” Robbie crossed his arms, daring me to contradict him. “He’ll break your heart, princess. Trust me, I’ve seen enough of his kind to know.”

Anger flared, anger that he dared stick his nose into my affairs, anger that he could be right. “Again, it’s none of your business, Rob!” I snapped, making his eyebrows arch. “And I can take care of myself, okay? Quit butting in where you’re not wanted.”

Hurt glimmered briefly, but then it was gone. “Fine, princess.” He smirked, holding up his hands. “Don’t get your royal pink panties in a twist. Forget I said anything.”

“I will.” Tossing my head, I flounced out of the room without looking back.

Guilt gnawed at me as I wove through the halls toward the cafeteria. I regretted snapping at Robbie, but sometimes his Big Brother act went too far. Still, Robbie had always been that way—jealous, overprotective, forever looking out for me, like it was his job. I couldn’t remember when I first met him; it felt like he’d always been there.

The cafeteria was noisy and dim. I hovered just inside the door, looking for Scott, only to see him at a table in the middle of the floor, surrounded by cheerleaders and football jocks. I hesitated. I couldn’t just march up to that table and sit down; Angie Whitmond and her cheerleading squad would rip me to shreds.

Scott glanced up and saw me, and a lazy smile spread over his face. Taking that as an invitation, I started toward him, weaving my way past the tables. He flipped out his iPhone, pressed a button, and looked at me with half-lidded eyes, still grinning.

A phone rang close by.

I jumped a bit, but continued walking. Behind me, there were gasps, and then hysterical giggles. And then, the whispered conversation that always makes you think they're talking about you. I felt eyes on the back of my head. Trying to ignore it, I continued down the aisle.

Another phone rang.

And another.

And now, whispers and laughter were spreading like wildfire. For some reason, I felt horribly exposed, as if a spotlight shone right on me and I was on display. The laughter couldn't be directed at me, could it? I saw several people point in my direction, whispering among themselves, and tried my best to ignore them. Scott's table was only a few feet away.

"Hey, hot cheeks!" A hand smacked my ass and I shrieked. Spinning around, I glared at Dan Ottoman, a blond, pimply clarinet player from band. He leered back at me and winked. "Never took you for a player, girl," he said, trying to ooze charm but reminding me of a dirty Kermit the Frog. "Come down to band sometime. I've got a flute you can play."

"What are you talking about?" I snarled, but he snickered and held up his phone.

At first, the screen was blank. But then a message flashed across it in bright yellow. *"How is Meghan Chase like a cold beer?"* it read. I gasped, and the words disappeared as a picture flashed into view.

Me. Me with Scott in the parking lot, his arm around my shoulders, a wide leer on his face. Only now—my mouth dropped open—I was butt naked, staring at him in wonder, my eyes blank and stupid. He'd obviously used Photoshop; my "body" was obscenely skinny and featureless, like a doll's, my chest as flat as a twelve-year-old's. I froze, and my heart stopped beating as the second part of the message scrolled over the screen.

"She's smooth and goes down easy!"

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and my cheeks flamed. Horrified, I looked up at Scott, to see his whole table roaring with laughter and pointing at me. Ring tones echoed through the cafeteria, and laughter pounded me like physical waves. I started trembling, and my eyes burned.

Covering my face, I turned and fled the cafeteria before I started wailing like a two-year-old. Shrieking laughter echoed around me, and tears stung my eyes like poison. I managed to cross the room without

tripping over benches or my feet, bashed open the doors, and escaped into the hallway.

I spent nearly an hour in the corner stall of the girls' bathroom, sobbing my eyes out and planning my move to Canada, or possibly Fiji—somewhere far, far away. I didn't dare show my face to anyone in this state ever again. Finally, as the tears slowed and my gasping breaths returned to normal, I reflected on how miserable my life had become.

I guess I should feel honored, I thought bitterly, holding my breath as a group of girls flocked into the bathroom. *Scott took the time to personally ruin my life. I bet he's never done that to anyone else. Lucky me, I'm the world's biggest loser.* Tears threatened again, but I was tired of bawling and held them back.

At first, I planned to hole up in the bathroom until school ended. But, if anyone missed me from class, this would be the first place they'd look. So, I finally gathered the courage to tiptoe down to the nurse's office and fake a horrid stomachache so I could hide out there.

The nurse stood about four feet in thick-heeled loafers, but the look she gave me when I peered through the door suggested she wasn't going to take any teenage foolishness. Her skin looked like that of a shrunken walnut, her white hair was pulled into a severe bun, and she wore tiny gold glasses on the end of her nose.

"Well, now, Ms. Chase," she said in a gravelly, high-pitched voice, setting aside her clipboard. "What are you doing here?" I blinked, wondering how she knew me. I'd only been to the nurse's office once before, when a stray soccer ball hit me in the nose. Back then, the nurse was bony and tall, with an overbite that made her look like a horse. This plump, shriveled little woman was new, and slightly unnerving, with the way she stared at me.

"I have a stomachache," I complained, holding my navel like it was about to burst. "I just need to lie down for a few minutes."

"Of course, Ms. Chase. There are some cots in the back. I'll bring you something to make you feel better."

I nodded and moved into a room divided by several huge sheets. Except for myself and the nurse, the room was empty. Perfect. I chose a corner cot and lay back on the paper-covered mattress.

Moments later, the nurse appeared, handing me a Dixie cup full of something that bubbled and steamed. "Take this, you'll feel better," she

said, pressing the cup into my hand.

I stared at it. The fizzling white liquid smelled like chocolate and herbs, except stronger, somehow, a mix so potent it made my eyes water. “What is it?” I asked.

The nurse just smiled and left the room.

I took a cautious sip and felt warmth spread from my throat down to my stomach. The taste was incredible, like the richest chocolate in the world, with just a hint of bitter aftertaste. I quaffed the rest in two gulps, holding the cup upside down to get the last drops.

Almost immediately, I felt sleepy. Lying back on the crinkly mattress, I closed my eyes for just a moment, and everything faded away.

* * *

I AWOKE TO LOW VOICES, talking in furtive tones, just beyond the curtains. I tried to move, but it felt like my body was wrapped in cotton, my head filled with gauze. I struggled to keep my eyes open. On the other side of the sheets, I saw two silhouettes.

“Don’t do anything reckless,” warned a low, gravelly voice. *The nurse,* I thought, wondering, in my delirium, if she would give me more of that chocolaty stuff. “Remember, your duty is to watch the girl. You must not do anything that will draw attention.”

“Me?” asked a tantalizingly familiar voice. “Draw attention to myself? Would I do such a thing?”

The nurse snorted. “If the entire cheerleading squad turns into mice, Robin, I will be very upset with you. Mortal adolescents are blind and cruel. You know that. You mustn’t take revenge, no matter how you feel about the girl. Especially now. There are more worrisome things on the move.”

I’m dreaming, I decided. *That must be it. What was in that drink, anyway?* In the dim light, the silhouettes playing across the curtain looked confusing and strange. The nurse, it seemed, was even smaller, barely three feet in height. The other shadow was even more peculiar: normal-size, but with strange protrusions on the side of his head that looked like horns, or ears.

The taller shadow sighed and moved to sit in a chair, crossing his long legs. “I’ve heard the same,” he muttered. “Dark rumors are stirring. The

Courts are restless. Seems like something is out there that has both of them scared."

"Which is why you must continue to be both her shield and her guardian." The nurse turned, putting both hands on her hips, her voice chiding. "I'm surprised you haven't given her the mistwine yet. She is sixteen today. The veil is beginning to lift."

"I know, I know. I'm getting to it." The shadow sighed, putting his head in his hands. "I'll take care of that later this afternoon. How is she?"

"Resting," said the nurse. "Poor thing, she was traumatized. I gave her a mild sleep potion that will knock her out until she goes home."

A chuckle. "The last kid who drank one of your 'mild' sleep potions didn't wake up for two weeks. You're one to talk about being inconspicuous."

The nurse's reply was garbled and broken, but I was almost sure she said, "She's her father's daughter. She'll be fine." Or maybe it was just me. The world went fuzzy, like an out-of-focus camera, and I knew nothing for a time.

* * *

"MEGHAN!"

Someone was shaking me awake. I cursed and flailed, momentarily confused, and finally lifted my head. My eyes felt like they had ten pounds of sand in them, and sleep gook crusted the corners, making it impossible to focus. Groaning, I wiped my lids and stared blearily into Robbie's face. For a moment, his brow was furrowed with concern. Then I blinked and he was his normal, grinning self.

"Wakey wakey, sleeping beauty," he teased as I struggled to a sitting position. "Lucky you, school is out. It's time to go home."

"Huh?" I muttered intelligently, wiping the last traces of sleep snot from my eyes. Robbie snorted and pulled me to my feet.

"Here," he said, handing me my backpack, heavy with books. "You're lucky I'm such a great friend. I got notes for all the classes you missed after lunch. Oh, and you're forgiven, by the way. I won't even say 'I told you so.'"

He was speaking too fast. My brain was still asleep, my mind foggy and disconnected. "What are you talking about?" I mumbled, shrugging

into my pack.

And then I remembered.

"I need to call my mom," I said, dropping back on the cot. Robbie frowned and looked confused. "She has to come pick me up," I elaborated. "No way am I getting on the bus, ever again." Despair settled on me, and I hid my face in my hands.

"Look, Meghan," Robbie said, "I heard what happened. It's not a big deal."

"Are you on crack?" I asked, glaring at him through my fingers. "The whole school is talking about me. This will probably go in the school paper. I'll be crucified if I show my face in public. And you say it's not a big deal?"

I drew my knees to my chest and buried my head in them. Everything was so horribly unfair. "It's my birthday," I moaned into my jeans. "This isn't supposed to happen to people on their birthdays."

Robbie sighed. Dropping his bag, he sat down and put his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. I sniffled and shed a few tears into his jacket, listening to his heartbeat through his shirt. It thudded rapidly against his chest, like he'd been sprinting several miles.

"Come on." Robbie stood, pulling me up with him. "You can do this. And I promise, no one will care what happened today. By tomorrow, everyone will have forgotten about it." He smiled, squeezing my arm. "Besides, don't you have a driver's permit to get?"

That one bright spark in the black misery of my life gave me hope. I nodded, steeling myself for what was to come. We left the nurse's office together, Robbie's hand clasped firmly around mine.

"Just stick close," he muttered as we neared the crowded part of the hallway. Angie and three of her groupies stood in front of the lockers, chattering away and snapping their gum. My stomach tensed and my heart began to pound. Robbie squeezed my hand. "It's okay. Don't let go of me, and don't say anything to anyone. They won't even notice we're here."

As we neared the cluster of girls, I prepared for them to turn on me with their laughter and their ugly remarks. But we swept by them without so much as a glance, though Angie was in the midst of describing my shameful retreat from the cafeteria.

"And then she, like, started bawling," Angie said, her nasal voice cutting through the hall. "And I was like, omygod she's *such* a loser. But

what can you expect from an inbred hillbilly?" Her voice dropped to a whisper and she leaned forward. "I heard her mom has an unnatural obsession with pigs, if you know what I mean."

The girls broke into a chorus of shocked giggles, and I almost snapped. Robbie, however, tightened his grip and pulled me away. I heard him mutter something under his breath, and felt a shudder go through the air, like thunder with no sound.

Behind us, Angie started to scream.

I tried to turn back, but Robbie yanked me onward, weaving through the crowd as the rest of the students jerked their heads toward the shrieking. But, for a split second, I saw Angie covering her nose with her hands, and her screams were sounding more and more like the squeals of a pig.

CHAPTER THREE

The Changeling

The bus ride home was silent, at least between Robbie and me. Partly because I didn't want to draw attention to myself, but mainly because I had a lot on my mind. We sat in the back corner, with me crushed against the window, staring at the trees flashing by. I had my iPod out and my headphones blasting my eardrums, but it was mostly an excuse not to talk to anyone.

Angie's piglike screams still echoed through my head. It was probably the most horrible sound I'd ever heard, and though she was a total bitch, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty. There was no doubt in my mind that Robbie had done something to her, though I couldn't prove it. I was actually afraid to bring it up. Robbie seemed like a different person now, quiet, brooding, watching the kids on the bus with predator-like intensity. He was acting weird—weird and creepy—and I wondered what was wrong with him.

Then there was that strange dream, which I was beginning to think hadn't really been a dream at all. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the familiar voice talking to the nurse had been Robbie's.

Something was happening, something strange and creepy and terrifying, and the scariest part of all was that it wore a familiar, ordinary face. I snuck a glance at Robbie. How well did I know him, really know him? He'd been my friend for longer than I could remember, and yet I'd never been to his house, or met his parents. The few times I suggested meeting at his place, he'd always had some excuse not to; his folks were out of town, or they were remodeling the kitchen, a kitchen I'd never seen. That was strange, but what was weirder was the fact that I'd never wondered about it, never questioned it, until now. Robbie was simply *there*, like he'd been conjured out of nothing, with no background, no home, and no past. What was his favorite music? Did he have goals in life? Had he ever fallen in love?

Not at all, my mind whispered, disturbingly. *You don't know him at all.*

I shivered and looked out the window again.

The bus lurched to a halt at a four-way stop, and I saw we'd left the outskirts of town and were now heading into the boondocks. My neighborhood. Rain still spattered the windows, making the swampy marshlands blurry and indistinct, the trees fuzzy dark shapes through the glass.

I blinked and straightened up in my seat. Deep in the swamp, a horse and rider stood beneath the limbs of an enormous oak, as still as the trees themselves. The horse was a huge black animal with a mane and tail that rippled behind it, even drenched as it was. Its rider was tall and lean, garbed in silver and black. A dark cape fluttered from its shoulders. Through the rain, I caught the barest glimpse of a face: young, pale, strikingly handsome…staring right at me. My stomach lurched and I caught my breath.

"Rob," I murmured, pulling my headphones out, "look at tha—"

Robbie's face was inches from mine, staring out the window, his eyes narrowed to green slits, hard and dangerous. My stomach twisted and I leaned away from him, but he didn't notice me. His lips moved, and he whispered one word, so soft I barely caught it, even as close as we were.

"Ash."

"Ash?" I repeated. "Who's Ash?"

The bus coughed and lurched forward again. Robbie leaned back, his face so still it could've been carved from stone. Swallowing, I looked out the window, but the space beneath the oak was empty. Horse and rider were gone, like they'd never existed.

* * *

THE WEIRDNESS KEPT getting weirder.

"Who's Ash?" I repeated, turning back to Robbie, who seemed to be in his own world. "Robbie? Hey!" I poked him in the shoulder. He twitched and finally looked at me. "Who is Ash?"

"Ash?" For a moment, his eyes were bright and feral, his face like that of a wild dog. Then he blinked and was normal again. "Oh, he's just an old buddy of mine, from long ago. Don't worry about it, princess."

His words slid over me strangely, like he was willing me to forget simply by requesting it. I felt a prickle of annoyance that he was hiding something, but it quickly faded, because I couldn't remember what we were talking about.

At our curb, Robbie leaped up as if the seat was on fire and rushed out the door. Blinking at his abrupt departure, I put my iPod safely in my backpack before leaving the bus. The last thing I wanted was for the expensive thing to get wet.

"I have to go," Robbie announced when I joined him on the pavement. His green eyes swept through the trees, as if he expected something to come crashing out of the woods. I gazed around, but except for some bird trilling overhead, the forest was quiet and still. "I…um…forgot something at home." He turned to me then with an apologetic look. "See you tonight, princess? I'll bring that champagne over later, okay?"

"Oh." I'd forgotten about that. "Sure."

"Go straight home, okay?" Robbie narrowed his eyes, his face intense. "Don't stop, and don't talk to anyone you meet, got it?"

I laughed nervously. "What are you, my mom? Are you going to tell me not to run with scissors and to look both ways before crossing the street? Besides," I continued as Robbie smirked, looking more like his normal self, "who would I meet way out here in the boondocks?" The image of the boy on the horse suddenly came to mind, and my stomach did that strange little flop again. Who was he? And why couldn't I stop thinking about him, if he even existed at all? Things were getting really odd. If it wasn't for Robbie's weird reaction on the bus, I would think the boy was another of my crazy hallucinations.

"Fine." Robbie waved, flashing his mischievous grin. "See you later, princess. Don't let Leatherface catch you on your way home."

I kicked at him. He laughed, bounced away, and sprinted off down the road. Shouldering my backpack, I trudged up the driveway.

* * *

"MOM?" I CALLED, OPENING THE front door. "Mom, I'm home."

Silence greeted me, echoing off the walls and floor, hanging heavy in the air. The stillness was almost a living thing, crouched in the center of

the room, watching me with cold eyes. My heart began a loud, irregular thud in my chest. Something was wrong.

"Mom?" I called again, venturing into the house. "Luke? Anybody home?" The door creaked as I crept in farther. The television blared and flickered, playing a rerun of an old black-and-white sitcom, though the couch in front of it was empty. I switched it off and continued down the hall, into the kitchen.

For a moment, everything looked normal, except for the refrigerator door, swinging on its hinges. A small object on the floor caught my attention. At first, I thought it was a dirty rag. But, looking closer, I saw it was Floppy, Ethan's rabbit. The stuffed animal's head had been torn off, and cotton spilled from the hole in the neck.

Straightening, I heard a small noise on the other side of the dining table. I walked around, and my stomach twisted so violently that bile rose to my throat.

My mother lay on her back on the checkered tile floor, arms and legs flung akimbo, one side of her face covered in glistening crimson. Her purse, its contents scattered everywhere, lay beside one limp white hand. Standing over her in the doorway, his head cocked to one side like a curious cat, was Ethan.

And he was smiling.

* * *

"MOM!" I SCREAMED, FLINGING myself down beside her. "Mom, are you okay?" I grabbed one shoulder and shook her, but it was like shaking a dead fish. Her skin was still warm, though, so she couldn't be dead. Right?

Where the hell is Luke? I shook her again, watching her head flop limply. It made my stomach turn. "Mom, wake up! Can you hear me? It's Meghan." I looked around frantically, then snatched a washrag off the sink. As I dabbed it over her bloodied face, I became aware again of Ethan standing in the doorway, his blue eyes now wide and teary.

"Mommy slipped," he whispered, and I noticed a clear, slick puddle on the floor in front of the refrigerator. Hand trembling, I dipped a finger in the goo and sniffed. Vegetable oil? What the hell? I wiped more blood off her face and noticed a small gash on her temple, nearly invisible beneath blood and hair.

“Will she die?” Ethan asked, and I glanced at him sharply. Though his eyes were huge and round, and tears brimmed in the corners, he sounded more curious than anything.

I wrenched my gaze away from my half brother. I had to get help. Luke was gone, so the only thing left would be to call for an ambulance. But, just as I stood to get the phone, Mom groaned, stirred, and opened her eyes.

My heart leaped. “Mom,” I said as she struggled into a sitting position, a dazed look on her face. “Don’t move. I’ll call 911.”

“Meghan?” Mom looked around, blinking. A hand came up to touch her cheek, and she stared at the blood on her fingers. “What happened? I… I must’ve fallen…”

“You hit your head,” I replied, standing up and looking around for the phone. “You might have a concussion. Hold on, I’m calling the ambulance.”

“The ambulance? No, no.” Mom sat up, looking a little clearer. “Don’t do that, honey. I’m fine. I’ll just clean up and put on a Band-Aid. There’s no need to go to that trouble.”

“But, Mom—”

“I’m fine, Meg.” Mom snatched the forgotten washrag and began wiping the blood off her face. “I’m sorry if I frightened you, but I’ll be fine. It’s only blood, nothing serious. Besides, we can’t afford a big doctor’s bill.” She abruptly straightened and looked around the room. “Where’s your brother?”

Startled, I looked back to the doorway, but Ethan was gone.

* * *

MOM’S PROTESTS WERE WASTED when Luke got home. He took one look at her pale, bandaged face, threw a fit, and insisted they go to the hospital. Luke can be stubbornly persistent when he needs to be, and Mom eventually buckled under the pressure. She was still calling out instructions to me—take care of Ethan, don’t let him stay up too late, there’s frozen pizza in the fridge—as Luke bundled her into his battered Ford and roared off down the driveway.

As the truck turned a corner and vanished from sight, the chilly silence descended on the house once more. I shivered, rubbing my arms, feeling it

creep into the room and breathe down my neck. The house where I'd lived most of my life seemed unfamiliar and frightening, as if things lurked in the cupboards and around corners, waiting to grab me as I walked past. My gaze lingered on the crumpled remains of Floppy, strewn across the floor, and for some reason, it made me very sad and scared. No one in this house would rip up Ethan's favorite stuffed animal. Something was very wrong.

Footsteps padded over the floor. I turned to find Ethan in the doorway, staring at me. He looked strange without the rabbit in his arms, and I wondered why he wasn't upset about it.

"I'm hungry," he announced, making me blink. "Cook me something, Meggie."

I scowled at the demanding tone.

"It's not dinnertime yet, squirt," I told him, crossing my arms. "You can wait a couple hours."

His eyes narrowed, and his lips curled back from his teeth. For just a moment, I imagined they were jagged and sharp. "I'm hungry *now,*" he growled, taking a step forward. Dread shot through me and I recoiled.

Almost immediately, his face smoothed out again, his eyes enormous and pleading. "Please, Meggie?" he whined. "Please? I'm so hungry." He pouted, and his voice turned menacing. "Mommy didn't make me food, either."

"All right, fine! If it'll shut you up, fine." The angry words erupted from fear, and from a hot embarrassment because I was afraid. Of Ethan. Of my stupid, four-year-old half brother. I didn't know where these demonic mood swings of his were coming from, but I hoped they weren't the start of a trend. Maybe he was just upset because of Mom's accident. Maybe if I fed the brat, he'd fall asleep and leave me alone for the night. I stalked to the freezer, grabbed the pizza, and shoved it in the oven.

While the pizza cooked, I tried to clean up the puddle of vegetable oil in front of the refrigerator. I wondered how the stuff had ended up on the floor, especially when I found the empty bottle stuffed in the trash. I smelled like Crisco when I was done, and the floor still had a slick spot, but it was the best I could do.

The creak of the oven door startled me. I turned to see Ethan pulling it open and reaching inside.

"Ethan!" Grabbing his wrist, I yanked him back, ignoring his scream of protest. "What are you doing, you idiot? You want to burn yourself?"

“Hungry!”

“Sit down!” I snapped, plunking him into a dining chair.

He actually tried to hit me, the little ingrate. I resisted the urge to smack him. “God, you’re being snotty today. Sit there and be quiet. I’ll get your food in a second.”

When the pizza came out, he fell on it like a wild thing, not waiting for it to cool. Astonished, I could only stare as he tore through the slices like a starved dog, barely stopping to chew as he gulped it down. Soon, his face and hands were smeared with sauce and cheese, and the pizza was rapidly diminished. In less than two minutes, he had consumed it all, down to the last crumb.

Ethan licked his hands, then raised his eyes to me and frowned. “Still hungry.”

“You are not,” I told him, snapping out of my daze. “If you eat anything else you’ll get sick. Go play in your room or something.”

He stared at me with a baleful expression, and it seemed that his skin grew darker, wrinkled, and shriveled beneath his baby fat. Without warning, he leaped off the chair, rushed me, and sank his teeth into my leg.

“Ow!” Pain lanced through my calf like an electrical shock. Grabbing his hair, I tried prying his teeth from my skin, but he clung to me like a leech and bit down harder. It felt like glass shards stabbing into my leg. Tears blurred my vision, and my knees almost buckled from the pain.

“Meghan!”

Robbie stood inside the front door, a backpack flung over his shoulder, his green eyes wide with shock.

Ethan released me, jerking his head toward the shout. Blood smeared his lips. Seeing Robbie, he hissed and—there’s no other way to put it—*scuttled* away from us and up the stairs, vanishing from sight.

I shook so hard I had to sit down on the couch. My leg throbbed, and my breath came in short, uneven gasps. Blood, bright and vivid, seeped through my jeans like an unfurling blossom. Dazed, I stared at it, numbness deadening my limbs, freezing them in shock.

Robbie crossed the room in three strides and knelt beside me. Briskly, as if he’d done this kind of thing before, he began rolling up the cuff of one pant leg.

“Robbie,” I whispered as he bent over his task, his long fingers surprisingly gentle. “What’s happening? Everything’s going crazy. Ethan

just attacked me…like a wild dog."

"That wasn't your brother," Robbie muttered as he pushed back the material, revealing a bloody mess below my knee. An oval of jagged puncture wounds marred my leg, seeping blood, and the skin around them was already purpling. Rob whistled softly. "Nasty. Wait here. I'll be right back."

"Like I'm going anywhere," I replied automatically, and then his previous statement sank in. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, that wasn't Ethan? Who the hell else could it be?"

Rob ignored me. Walking to his backpack, he opened it and pulled out a long, green-tinted bottle and a tiny crystal cup. I frowned. Why was he going for champagne now? I was hurt, in pain, and my kid brother had turned into a monster. I was certainly not in the mood for celebrating.

With the utmost care, Robbie poured the champagne into the cup and walked back, being careful not to spill a single drop.

"Here," he said, giving it to me. The cup sparkled in his hand. "Drink this. Where do you keep the towels?"

I took it suspiciously. "In the bathroom. Just don't use Mom's good white ones." As Rob walked off, I peered into the tiny cup. There was barely enough for a swallow. It didn't look like champagne to me. I was expecting something fizzy white or pink, sparkling in the glass. The liquid in the cup was a deep, dark red, the color of blood. A fine mist writhed and danced on the surface.

"What is this?"

Robbie, returning from the bathroom with a white towel, rolled his eyes. "Do you have to question everything? It will help you forget the pain. Just drink it already."

I sniffed experimentally, expecting hints of roses or berries or some type of sweet scent mixed in with the alcohol.

It smelled of nothing. Nothing at all.

Oh, well. I raised the glass in a silent toast. "Happy birthday to me."

The wine filled my mouth, flooding my senses. It tasted of nothing, and everything. It tasted of twilight and mist, moonlight and frost, emptiness and longing. The room swayed, and I fell back against the couch, it was so strong. Reality blurred at the edges, wrapping me in a fuzzy haze. I felt sick and sleepy all at once.

By the time my senses cleared, Robbie was tying a bandage around my leg. I didn't remember him cleaning or dressing the wound. I felt numb and dazed, like a blanket had dropped over my thoughts, making it hard to concentrate.

"There," Robbie said, straightening up. "That's done. At least your leg won't fall off." His eyes swept up to mine, anxious and assessing. "How're you feeling, princess?"

"Un," I said intelligently, and tried to sweep the cobwebs from my brain. There was something I wasn't remembering, something important. Why was Robbie binding my leg? Had I hurt myself somehow?

I bolted upright.

"Ethan bit me!" I exclaimed, indignant and furious all over again. I turned on Robbie. "And you…you said that wasn't Ethan at all! What were you talking about? What's going on?"

"Relax, princess." Robbie tossed the bloody towel onto the floor and plopped onto a footstool. He sighed. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this. My fault, I suppose. I shouldn't have left you alone today."

"What are you talking about?"

"You weren't supposed to see this, any of this," Robbie went on, to my utter confusion. He seemed to be talking more to himself than me. "Your Sight has always been strong, that was a given. Still, I didn't expect them to go after your family, too. This changes things."

"Rob, if you don't tell me what's going on—"

Robbie looked at me. His eyes gleamed, impish and feral. "Tell you? Are you sure?" His voice went soft and dangerous, and goose bumps crawled up my arms. "Once you start seeing things, you won't be able to stop. People have gone mad with too much knowledge." He sighed, and the menace dropped from his eyes. "I don't want that to happen to you, princess. It doesn't have to be this way, you know. I can make you forget all of this."

"Forget?"

He nodded and held up the wine bottle. "This is mistwine. You just had a swallow. A cup will make everything go back to normal." He balanced the bottle on two fingers, watching it sway back and forth. "One cup, and you'll be normal again. Your brother's behavior will not seem strange, and you won't remember anything weird or scary. You know what they say—ignorance is bliss, right?"

Despite my uneasiness, I felt a slow flame of anger burning my chest. “So, you want me to drink that…that stuff, and just forget about Ethan. Just forget about my only brother. That’s what you’re saying.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, when you put it like that…”

The burning grew hot and furious, searing away the fear. I clenched my fists. “Of course I won’t forget about Ethan! He’s my brother! Are you really that inhuman, or just stupid?”

To my surprise, a grin spread over his face. He dropped the bottle, caught it, and put it on the floor. “The first,” he said, very softly.

That threw me. “What?”

“Inhuman.” He was still grinning at me, the smile stretching his whole mouth so that his teeth gleamed in the fading light. “I warned you, princess. I’m not like you. And now, neither is your brother.”

Despite the fear prickling my stomach, I leaned forward. “Ethan? What do you mean? What’s wrong with him?”

“That wasn’t Ethan.” Robbie leaned back, crossing his arms. “The thing that attacked you today is a changeling.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Puck

I stared at Robbie, wondering if this was another one of his stupid pranks. He sat there, observing me calmly, watching my reaction. Though he still wore a half grin, his eyes were hard and serious. He wasn't joking around.

"Ch-changeling?" I finally stammered, looking at him like he was insane. "Isn't that some kind of…of…"

"Faery," Robbie finished for me. "A changeling is a faery offspring that has been switched with a human child. Usually, a troll's or goblin's, though the sidhe—the faery nobility—have been known to make the switch, as well. Your brother has been replaced. That thing is not Ethan, any more than I am."

"You're crazy," I whispered. If I wasn't sitting, I'd be backing away from him toward the door. "You've gone off the deep end. Time to cut back on the anime, Rob. There's no such thing as faeries."

Robbie sighed. "Really? That's what you're going with? How predictable." He leaned back and crossed his arms. "I thought better of you, princess."

"Thought better of *me?*" I cried, leaping off the couch. "Listen to yourself! You really expect me to believe that my brother is some kind of pixie with glitter dust and butterfly wings?"

"Don't be stupid," Rob said mildly. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You're thinking 'Tinker Bell,' which is a typical human response to the word *faery.* The real fey aren't like that at all." He paused a moment. "Well, except for the piskies, of course, but that's a different story altogether."

I shook my head, my thoughts spinning in several directions at once. "I can't deal with this right now," I muttered and staggered away from him. "I have to check on Ethan."

Robbie only shrugged, leaned back against the wall, and put his hands behind his head. After one final glare at him, I rushed up the stairs and

opened the door to Ethan's bedroom.

It was a mess, a war zone of broken toys, books, and scattered clothes. I looked around for Ethan, but the room appeared empty, until I heard a faint scratching noise under his bed.

"Ethan?" Kneeling down, pushing away broken action figures and snapped Tinkertoys, I peered into the space between the mattress and the floor. In the shadows, I could just make out a small lump huddled in the corner with his back to me. He was trembling.

"Ethan," I called softly. "Are you all right? Why don't you come out a second? I'm not mad at you." Well, that was a lie, but I was more shaken than angry. I wanted to drag Ethan downstairs and prove that he wasn't a troll or a changeling or whatever Robbie said he was.

The lump stirred a little, and Ethan's voice drifted out of the gap. "Is the scary man still here?" he asked in a small, frightened voice. I might've been sympathetic, if my calf wasn't throbbing so much.

"No," I lied. "He's gone now. You can come out." Ethan didn't move, and my irritation sparked. "Ethan, this is ridiculous. Get out of there already, will you?" I stuck my head farther under the mattress and reached for him.

Ethan turned on me with a hiss, eyes burning yellow, and lunged at my arm. I jerked it back as his teeth, jaggedly pointed like a shark's, snapped together with a horrid clicking sound. Ethan snarled, his skin the ghastly blue of a drowned infant's, bared teeth shining in the darkness. I shrieked, scrabbling back, Lego blocks and Tinkertoys biting into my palms. Hitting the wall, I leaped to my feet, turned, and fled the room.

And ran smack into Robbie, standing outside the door.

He grabbed my shoulders as I screamed and started hitting him, barely conscious of what I was doing. He bore the attack wordlessly, simply holding me in place, until I collapsed against him and buried my head in his chest. And he held me as I sobbed out my fear and anger.

At last, the tears stopped, leaving me drained and utterly exhausted. I sniffed and backed away, wiping my eyes on my palm, shaking. Robbie still stood there quietly, his shirt damp with my tears. The door to Ethan's bedroom was shut, but I could hear faint thumps and cackling laughter beyond the door.

I shivered, looking up at Robbie. "Ethan is really gone?" I whispered. "He's not just hiding somewhere? He's really gone?"

Robbie nodded gravely. I looked at Ethan's bedroom door and bit my lip. "Where is he now?"

"Probably in Faeryland." Stated so simply, I almost laughed from the sheer ridiculousness of it all. Ethan had been stolen by faeries and replaced with an evil doppelgänger. *Faeries* kidnapped my brother. I was tempted to pinch myself to see if this was a twisted dream or hallucination. Maybe I had fallen into a drunken stupor on the couch. On impulse, I bit the inside of my cheek, hard. The sharp pain and taste of blood told me this was, indeed, real.

I looked to Robbie, and his grave expression banished the last of my doubts. A sick feeling rose to my stomach, making me nauseous and afraid.

"So…" I swallowed and forced myself to be calm. Okay, Ethan was kidnapped by faeries; I could deal with this. "What do we do now?"

Robbie raised one shoulder. "That's up to you, princess. There are human families that have raised changelings as their own, though they are usually unaware of the child's true nature. Generally speaking, if you feed it and leave it alone, it will settle into its new home without too much trouble. Changelings make a nuisance of themselves at first, but most families adapt." Robbie grinned, but it was an attempt at lightheartedness rather than humor. "Hopefully, your folks will think he's just going through a late terrible twos."

"Robbie, that thing bit me, and probably made Mom slip and fall in the kitchen. It's more than a nuisance, it's dangerous." I glared at Ethan's closed door and shuddered. "I want it gone. I want my brother back. How do we get rid of it?"

Robbie sobered. "Well, there are ways of getting rid of changelings," he began, looking uncomfortable. "One old method is to brew beer or cook stew in eggshells, and that will make the changeling comment on the weirdness of it. But that method was for infants who'd been switched—since the baby was too young to speak, the parents knew that the impostor was a changeling and the real parents had to take it back. I don't think it'll work for someone older, like your brother."

"Great. What's another way?"

"Er, the other way is to beat the changeling near to death, until the screams force the fey parents to return the real child. Barring that, you could stick him in the oven and cook him alive—"

“Stop.” I felt sick. “I can’t do any of those things, Robbie. I just can’t. There has to be another way.”

“Well…” Rob looked hesitant and scratched the back of his neck. “The only other way is to travel into the faery lands and take him back. Bringing the real child into the home again will force the changeling to leave. But…” He paused, as if on the verge of saying something, only to think better of it.

“But what?”

“But…you don’t know who took your brother. And without that knowledge, you’ll just be walking in circles. And, if you’re wondering, walking in circles in Faeryland is a very, very bad idea.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t know who took him,” I agreed, staring hard at Robbie, “but you do.”

Robbie shuffled nervously. “I have a guess.”

“Who?”

“It’s just a guess, mind you. I could be wrong. Don’t go jumping to conclusions.”

“Robbie!”

He sighed. “The Unseelie Court.”

“The what?”

“The Unseelie Court,” Robbie repeated. “The Court of Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness. Sworn enemies of King Oberon and Queen Titania. Very powerful. Very nasty.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I held up my hands. “Oberon? Titania? Like from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream?* Aren’t those just ancient myths?”

“Ancient, yes,” Robbie said. “Myths, no. The faery lords are immortal. Those who have songs, ballads, and stories written about them never die. Belief, worship, imagination—we were born of the dreams and fears of mortals, and if we are remembered, even in some small way, we will always exist.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’” I pointed out. “As though you’re one of those immortal faeries. As though you’re one of them.” Robbie smiled, a proud, impish smile, and I gulped. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Ah, well.” Robbie shrugged, trying to look modest and failing entirely. “If you’ve read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* you might remember me. There was this unfortunate incident, completely unplanned,

where I gave someone a donkey's head and made Titania fall in love with him."

I ran through the play in my mind. I'd read it in the seventh grade, but had forgotten most of the plot. There were so many characters, so many names to sift through, people falling in and out of love so often it was ridiculous. I remembered a few human names: Hermia, Helena, Demetrius. On the faery side, there was Oberon and Titania and…

"Shit," I whispered, falling back against the wall. I stared at Robbie with new eyes. "Robbie Goodfell. Robin…you're Robin Goodfellow."

Robbie grinned. "Call me Puck."

* * *

PUCK. *THE* PUCK WAS STANDING in my hallway.

"No way," I whispered, shaking my head. This was Robbie, my closest friend. I would've known if he was an ancient faery. Wouldn't I?

Frighteningly, the more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed. I'd never seen Robbie's house, or his parents. The teachers all loved him, though he never did a lick of school-work and slept through most of the classes. And strange things happened when he was around: mice and frogs ended up in desks, or names were switched around on term papers. Though Robbie Goodfell thought these scenarios absolutely hilarious, no one ever suspected him.

"No," I muttered again, backing away toward my room. "That's impossible. Puck is a legend, a myth. I don't believe it."

Robbie gave me that eerie smile. "Then, princess, by all means, let me assure you."

His arms rose from his sides, as if he might levitate into the air. From downstairs, I heard the front door creak open, and I hoped Mom and Luke weren't home yet. *Yeah, Mom, Ethan's turned into a monster and my best friend thinks he's a faery. How was your day?*

An enormous black bird swooped into the hallway. I yelped and ducked as the raven, or crow or whatever it was, made a beeline straight for Robbie and perched on his arm. They watched me, the pair of them, with glittering eyes, and Robbie smiled.

A rush of wind, and suddenly, the air was filled with screaming black birds, swooping in from the open door. I gasped and ducked as the cloud of

ravens filled the hallway, their raucous cries nearly deafening me. They swirled around Robbie, a tornado of beating wings and sharp claws, tearing at him with talons and beaks. Feathers flew everywhere, and Robbie disappeared within the swirling mass. Then, as one, the birds scattered, flying out the open door as swiftly as they had come. As the last bird swooped outside, the door slammed behind it, and silence descended once more. I caught my breath and glanced at Rob.

Robbie was gone. Only a swirl of black feathers and dust motes remained in the place where he'd stood.

It was too much. I felt my sanity unravel like frayed cloth. With a choked scream, I turned and fled into my room, slamming the door behind me. Flinging myself under my bedcovers, I put the pillow over my head and shook, hoping that when I woke up, things would be normal.

My door opened, and the sound of wings fluttered into my room. I didn't want to look and pulled the covers tighter around me, willing the nightmare to end. I heard a sigh, and footsteps padded over the floor.

"Well, I tried to warn you, princess."

I peeked out. Robbie stood there, looking down at me, a pained smile on his face. Seeing him, I felt relieved, angry, and terrified at the same time. I threw off the covers and sat up, narrowing my eyes as I stared at him. Robbie waited, hands in the pockets of his jeans, as if daring me to contradict him some more.

"You really are Puck?" I said finally. "*The* Puck? Like in the stories?"

Robbie/Puck gave a little bow. "The one and only."

My heart was still pounding. I took a deep breath to calm it and glared at the stranger in my room. My emotions churned; I didn't know what to feel. I settled on anger; Robbie had been my best friend for years, and he never saw fit to share his secret with me. "You could have told me sooner," I said, trying not to sound hurt. "I would have kept your secret." He only smirked and raised an eyebrow, infuriating me even more. "Fine. Go back to Faeryland, or wherever you come from. Aren't you supposed to be Oberon's jester or something? Why were you hanging around *me* so long?"

"You wound me, princess." Robbie sounded anything but hurt. "And after I made up my mind to help you get your brother back."

My anger vanished instantly, replaced with fear. With all the talk of fey and faery lords, I'd nearly forgotten about Ethan.

I shivered as my stomach twisted into a tight little ball. This still felt like something out of a nightmare. But Ethan was gone, and faeries were real. I had to accept that now. Robbie stood there, gazing at me expectantly. A black feather dropped from his hair, spiraling down to the bed. Gingerly, I picked it up, twirling it in my fingers. It felt solid and real.

"You'll help me?" I whispered.

He gave me a shrewd look, one corner of his mouth turning up. "Do you know a way into Faery by yourself?"

"No."

"Then you need my help." Robbie smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Besides, it's been a while since I've gone home, and nothing ever happens here. Storming the Unseelie Court sounds like fun."

I didn't share his enthusiasm. "When do we leave?" I asked.

"Now," Robbie replied. "The sooner the better. Do you have anything you want to take, princess? You might not be back for a while."

I nodded, trying to stay calm. "Just give me a minute."

Robbie nodded and walked into the hallway. I snatched my bright orange backpack and tossed it on the bed, wondering what to take. What did one need for an overnight trip to Faeryland? I grabbed jeans and an extra shirt, a flashlight, and a bottle of aspirin, stuffing them into the pack. Walking down to the kitchen, I tossed in a Coke and a couple of bags of chips, hoping Robbie would know where to find food on the journey. Finally, not even knowing why, I grabbed my iPod, zipping it into the side pocket.

Mom was supposed to take me to the DMV today. I hesitated, biting my lip. What would Mom and Luke think when they found me gone? I'd always followed the rules, never sneaking out—except that one time with Robbie—never staying up past curfew. I wondered what Rob meant when he said we'd be gone "awhile." Luke might not even notice I'd left, but Mom would worry. Grabbing an old homework sheet, I started to write her a quick note, but stopped, my pen hovering over the paper.

What are you going to tell her? "Dear Mom, Ethan's been kidnapped by faeries. Gone to get him back. Oh, and don't trust the Ethan that's here—he's really a faery changeling." It sounded insane even to me. I hesitated, thinking, then scrawled a quick:

Mom, there’s something I have to take care of. I’ll be back soon, I promise. Don’t worry about me. Meghan

I stuck the note on the refrigerator door, trying not to think that I might never see home again. Shouldering the pack, feeling my insides squirm like a nest of snakes, I climbed the stairs.

Robbie waited on the landing, arms crossed over his chest, wearing a lazy grin. “Ready?”

Apprehension tickled my stomach. “Will it be very dangerous?”

“Oh, extremely,” Robbie said, walking up to Ethan’s bedroom door. “That’s what makes it fun. You can die in so many interesting ways—skewered on a glass sword, dragged underwater and eaten by a kelpie, turned into a spider or a rosebush for all time—” He looked back at me. “Well, are you coming or not?”

I noticed my hands were shaking and held them to my chest. “Why are you saying these things?” I whispered. “Are you trying to scare me?”

“Yes,” Robbie replied, unabashed. He paused at Ethan’s door, one hand on the knob, and stared at me. “These are the things you’re going to face, princess. I’m giving you fair warning now. Still think you want to go? My previous offer still stands.”

I remembered the taste of the mistwine, the desperate longing for more, and shivered. “No,” I said quickly. “I won’t leave Ethan with a bunch of monsters. I’ve lost a father already—I won’t lose a brother, as well.”

And then, something occurred to me, something that left me breathless, wondering why I didn’t think of it before. *Dad.* My heart pounded, recalling half-remembered dreams, where my father vanished beneath a pond and never resurfaced. What if he’d been kidnapped by faeries, as well? I could find Ethan *and* my dad, and bring them *both* home!

“Let’s go,” I demanded, looking Robbie in the eyes. “Come on, we’ve wasted enough time here. If we’re gonna do this, let’s get it over with.”

Rob blinked, and a strange look passed over his face. For a moment, it seemed like he wanted to say something. But then he shook himself, like he was coming out of a trance, and the moment was gone.

“All right, then. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He grinned, and the gleam in his eyes grew brighter. “First things first. We have to find an

entrance to the Nevernever. That's Faeryland to you. It's not a place you can just walk to, and the doors are usually very well hidden. Fortunately, I have a good idea of where one is lurking." He grinned, turned away, and pounded on Ethan's bedroom door. "Knock, knock!" he called in a high, singsong voice.

For a moment, silence. Then came a thud and a crash, as if something heavy had been hurled at the door. "Go away!" snarled the voice from within.

"Ah, no. That's not how the joke goes," called Rob. "I say 'knock, knock,' and you're supposed to answer with 'who's there?'"

"Fuck off!"

"Nope, that's still wrong." Robbie seemed unperturbed. I, however, was horrified at Ethan's language, though I knew it wasn't him. "Here," continued Rob in an amiable voice, "I'll go through the whole thing, so you'll know how to answer next time." He cleared his throat and pounded the door again. "Knock, knock!" he bellowed. "Who's there? Puck! Puck who? Puck, who will turn you into a squealing pig and stuff you in the oven if you don't get out of our way!" And with that, he banged open the door.

The thing that looked like Ethan stood on the bed, a book in each hand. With a hiss, he hurled them at the doorway. Robbie dodged, but one paperback hit me in the stomach and I grunted.

"Please," I heard Rob mutter, and a ripple went through the air. Suddenly, all the books in the room flapped their covers, rose off the floor and shelves, and began dive-bombing Ethan like a flock of enraged seagulls. I could only stare, feeling my life get more surreal by the second. The fake Ethan hissed and snarled, swatting at the books as they buzzed around him, until one hit him smack in the face and tumbled him off the mattress. Spitting in fury, he darted under the bed. I heard claws scrabbling against the wood as his feet vanished into the crawl space. Curses and growls drifted out from the darkness.

Robbie shook his head. "Amateurs." He sighed as the books swooping around the room froze midflight and rained to the floor with echoing thuds. "Let's go, princess."

* * *

I SHOOK MYSELF AND PICKED MY way over fallen books, joining Robbie in the middle of the room. “So,” I ventured, trying to sound casual, as if flying books and faeries were something I encountered every day. “Where’s this entrance to Faeryland? Will you have to make a magic ring or cast a spell or something?”

Rob snickered. “Not exactly, princess. You’re making it too complicated. Doorways to the Nevernever tend to appear in places where there is a lot of belief, creativity, or imagination. Often you can find one in a child’s bedroom closet, or under his bed.”

Floppy’s afraid of the man in the closet. I shivered, mentally apologizing to my half brother. When I found him again, I’d be sure to tell him I believed in the monsters, too.

“The closet, then,” I murmured, stepping over books and toys to reach it. My hand shook a bit as I grabbed the doorknob. *No turning back now,* I told myself, and pulled it open.

A tall, emaciated figure with a narrow face and sunken eyes stared at me as the door swung open. A black suit clung to its rail-thin body, and a bowler hat perched atop its pointed head. It blinked wide, staring at me, and bloodless lips pulled back in a grimace, revealing thin, pointed teeth. I leaped back with a shriek.

“My closet!” hissed the figure. A spiderlike hand darted out and grabbed the doorknob. “My closet! Mine!” And it slammed the door with a bang.

Robbie gave an exasperated sigh as I skittered behind him, my heart careening around my rib cage like a bat. “Bogeys,” he muttered, shaking his head. He strode to the door, tapped on it three times, and flung it open.

This time, the space stood empty, except for hanging shirts, stacked boxes, and normal closet things. Robbie shoved aside the clothes, maneuvered around the boxes, and put a hand to the back wall, tracing his fingers along the wood. Curious, I edged closer.

“Where are you?” he muttered, feeling along the wall. I crept to the doorway and peered over his shoulder. “I know you’re here. Where is… Aha.”

Crouching down, he took a breath and blew against the wall. Instantly, a cloud of dust arose, billowing around him and sparkling like orange glitter.

When he straightened, I saw a gold handle on the back wall, and the faint outline of a door, pale light shining through the bottom crack.

"Come on, princess." Rob turned and beckoned me forward. His eyes glowed green in the darkness. "This is our ride. Your one-way ticket to the Nevernever."

I hesitated, waiting for my pulse to slow to something resembling normal. It didn't. *This is insane,* a small, scared part of me whispered. Who knew what waited through that doorway, what horrors lurked in the shadows? I might never come home again. This was my last chance to turn back.

No, I told myself. *I can't turn back. Ethan is out there, somewhere. Ethan is counting on me.* I took a deep breath and one step forward.

A wrinkled hand shot from beneath the bed, latching on to my ankle. It yanked savagely and I nearly fell, as a snarl echoed from the dark space beneath. With a shriek, I kicked free of the flailing claw, charged blindly into the closet, and slammed the door behind me.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nevernever

In the musty darkness of Ethan's closet, I pressed a hand to my chest and waited once more for my heartbeat to return to normal. Blackness surrounded me, except for the thin rectangle of light outlined against the far wall. I couldn't see Robbie, but I felt his presence close by, heard his quiet breathing in my ear.

"Ready?" he whispered, his breath warm on my skin. And before I could answer, he pushed the door back with a creak, revealing the Nevernever.

Pale silver light flooded the room. The clearing beyond the door frame was surrounded by enormous trees, so thick and tangled I couldn't see the sky through the branches. A curling mist crept along the ground, and the woods were dark and still, as if the forest was trapped in perpetual twilight. Here and there, brilliant splashes of color stood out among the gray. A patch of flowers, their petals a shocking electric-blue, waved gently in the mist. A creeper vine snaked around the trunk of a dying oak, long red thorns a stark contrast to the tree it was killing.

A warm breeze blew into the closet, carrying with it a shocking assortment of smells—smells that should not be together in one place. Crushed leaves and cinnamon, smoke and apples, fresh earth, lavender, and the faint, cloying scent of rot and decay. For a moment, I caught a tang of something metallic and coppery, wrapped around the smell of rot, but it was gone in the next breath. Clouds of insects swarmed overhead, and if I listened hard I could almost imagine I heard singing. The forest was still at first, but I then caught movement deep in the shadows, and heard leaves rustle all around us. Invisible eyes seemed to watch me from every angle, boring into my skin.

Robbie, his hair a bright flame atop his head, stepped through the doorway, gazed around, and laughed. "Home." He sighed, flinging his arms wide, as if to embrace it all. "I'm finally home." He spun in place

and, with another laugh, fell backward into the mist, like he was making a snow angel, and vanished.

I gulped and took a cautious step forward. Mist swirled around my ankles like a living thing, caressing my skin with damp fingers. “Rob?”

The silence mocked me. Out of the corner of my eye, something big and white darted into the trees like quicksilver. “Rob?” I called again, edging to the place he had fallen. “Where are you? Robbie?”

“Boo.” Rob appeared behind me, rising out of the mist like a vampire from its coffin. To say I screamed was a bit of an understatement.

“A little jumpy today, aren’t we?” Robbie laughed and darted out of reach before I could kill him. “Time to switch to decaf, princess. If you’re going to shriek at every bogey that jumps out and says ‘boo,’ you’ll be exhausted before we reach the edge of the woods.”

He had changed. Hunter-green pants and a thick brown hoodie replaced his jeans and ratty T-shirt. I couldn’t see his feet very well in the mist, but it looked like he’d traded his sneakers for soft leather boots. His face was leaner, harsher, with sharp angles and pointed features. Combined with his bright auburn hair and green eyes, he reminded me of a grinning fox.

But the most noticeable difference was his ears. Slender and pointed, they jutted out from the sides of his head, like…well, like an elf’s. And, in that moment, all traces of Robbie Goodfell disappeared. The boy I’d known for most of my life was gone, like he never existed, and only Puck remained.

“What’s the matter, princess?” Puck yawned, stretching his long limbs. Was it my imagination, or had he gotten taller, too? “You look like you lost your best friend.”

I ignored the question, not wanting to dwell on it. “How did you do that?” I asked, to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Your clothes, I mean. They’re different. And the way you made the books fly around the room. Was it magic?”

Puck grinned. “Glamour,” he said, as if that meant anything to me at all. I frowned at him, and he sighed. “I didn’t have time to change before we came here, and my lord King Oberon frowns on wearing mortal clothes to court. So I used glamour to make myself presentable. Just like I used glamour to make myself look human.”

“Wait a minute.” I thought back to the dream conversation between Robbie and the nurse. “Are there others like you…you faery-types,

walking around back home? Right under everyone's noses?"

Puck gave me a very eerie smile. "We're everywhere, princess," he said firmly. "Under your bed, in your attic, walking past you on the street." His smile grew wider, more wolfish. "Glamour is fueled by the dreams and imagination of mortals. Writers, artists, little boys pretending to be knights—the fey are drawn to them like moths to a flame. Why do you think so many children have imaginary friends? Even your brother had one. Floppy, I think he called it, though that wasn't its true name. A pity the changeling managed to kill it."

My stomach felt tight. "And…no one can see you?"

"We're invisible, or we use glamour to hide our true nature." Puck leaned against a tree, lacing his hands behind his head in a very Robbie-like fashion. "Don't look so shocked, princess. Mortals have perfected the art of not seeing what they don't expect to be there. Though, there are a few rare humans who can see through the mist and the glamour. Usually, these are very special individuals—innocent, naive dreamers—and the fey are even more attracted to them."

"Like Ethan," I murmured.

Puck gave me a strange look, one corner of his mouth quirked up. "Like you, princess." He seemed about to say something else, but then a branch snapped somewhere in the tangled darkness.

He straightened quickly. "Whoops, time to go. It's dangerous to linger in any one place. We'll attract unwanted attention."

"What?" I exclaimed as he strode across the clearing, moving as gracefully as a deer. "I thought you said this was home."

"The Nevernever is home to all fey," Puck said without looking back. "It's divided into territories, or more technically, Courts. The Seelie Court is Oberon's domain, while Mab rules the Unseelie territories. While in the Courts, it is usually forbidden to torment, maim, or kill another fey without permission from its rulers.

"However," he continued, looking back at me, "right now, we are in neutral territory, home of the wild fey. Here, as you humans put it, all bets are off. The things coming at us now could be a herd of satyrs who will make you dance until you're exhausted, then rape you one by one, or it could be a pack of hedge wolves that will tear us both apart. Either way, I don't think you want to hang around."

I was afraid again. It seemed I was always afraid. I didn't want to be here, in this eerie forest, with this person I only thought I knew. I wanted to go home. Only, home had become a frightening place as well, almost as much as the Nevernever. I felt lost and betrayed, out of place in a world that wished me harm.

Ethan, I reminded myself. *You're doing this for Ethan. Once you get him, you can go home and everything will go back to normal.*

The rustling grew louder, and twigs snapped as whatever was out there drew closer. "Princess," Puck snapped, right next to me. I jumped and bit down a shriek as he grabbed my wrist. "The aforementioned nasties have picked up our scent and are coming for us." Though his voice was casual, I could see the strain in his eyes. "If you don't want your first day in the Nevernever to be your last, I suggest we move."

I looked back and saw the door we came through standing upright in the middle of the clearing. "Will we be able to get back home this way?" I asked as Puck pulled me along.

"Nope." When I stared at him in horror, he shrugged. "Well, you can't expect the doors to stand around in one place, princess. Don't worry, though. You have me, remember? When the time comes, we'll find the way home."

We ran for the far side of the clearing, straight for a tangle of bushes with hooked yellow thorns as long as my thumb. I held back, sure we'd be sliced to ribbons, but as we neared, the branches shivered and peeled away from us, revealing a narrow path cutting through the trees. As we stepped through, the bushes knitted together again, hiding the trail and protecting our retreat.

We walked for hours, or at least it felt that way to me. Puck kept up a steady pace, neither hurrying nor slowing down, and in time the sounds of pursuit faded away. Sometimes the trail split, wending off in different directions, but Puck always chose a path without hesitation. Many times, I'd catch movement from the corner of my eye—a flash of color in the brush, a figure silhouetted between the trees—but when I turned, there'd be nothing. Sometimes, I almost swore I heard singing or music, but, of course, it would fade when I tried to focus on it. The sickly luminescence of the forest never dimmed or brightened, and when I asked Puck what time night would fall, he cocked an eyebrow at me and said night would come when it was ready.

Annoyed, I checked my watch, wondering how long we'd been traveling. I received an unpleasant shock. The slender hands were frozen in place. Either the watch's battery was dead, or something else was interfering.

Or maybe time doesn't exist in this place. I don't know why I found that immensely disturbing, but I did.

My feet were aching, my stomach hurt, and my legs were burning with exhaustion when the eternal twilight finally began to dim. Puck stopped, gazing up at the sky, where an enormous moon glimmered over the treetops, so close you could see pits and craters marring the surface.

"I suppose we should rest for the night." Puck sounded reluctant. He gave me a sideways grin as I collapsed on a moldy log. "We wouldn't want you stumbling onto a dancing mound, or following a white bunny down a dark hole. Come on, I know a place not far from here where we can sleep undisturbed."

He took my hand and pulled me to my feet. My limbs screamed in protest, and I almost sat down again. I was tired, cranky, and the last thing I wanted was more hiking. Gazing around, I saw a lovely little pond through a stand of trees. The water shimmered in the moonlight, and I paused, gazing out over the mirrored surface. "Why not stop there?" I asked.

Puck took one look at the pond, grimaced, and pulled me onward. "Ah, no," he said quickly. "Too many nasties lurking underwater—kelpies and glaistigs and mermaids and such. Best not to risk it."

I looked back and saw a dark shape breach the perfect surface of the pond, sending ripples across the still water. The top of a horse's head, coal-black and slick like a seal, watched me with baleful white eyes. With a gasp, I hurried on.

A few minutes later, we came to the trunk of a huge, gnarled tree. The bark was so knobby and rough that I could almost see faces peering out of the trunk. It reminded me of wrinkled old men, stacked atop each other and waving their crooked arms indignantly.

Puck knelt among the roots and knocked on the wood. I peered over his shoulder and, with a start, saw a tiny door, barely a foot tall, near the base of the tree. As I watched, wide-eyed, the door creaked open, and a head peered out suspiciously.

“Eh? Who’s there?” a rough, squeaky voice asked as I stared in wonder. The little man’s skin was the color of walnuts; his hair looked like a bundle of twigs sticking out of his scalp. He wore a brown tunic and brown leggings, and looked like a stick come to life, except for the eyes peering out of his face, black and shiny like a beetle’s.

“Good evening, Twiggs,” Puck greeted politely.

The little man blinked, squinting up at the figure towering over him. “Robin Goodfellow?” he squeaked at last. “Haven’t seen you round these parts in a while. What brings you to my humble tree?”

“Escort service,” Puck replied, shifting to the side so that Twiggs could get a clear view of me. Those beady eyes fixed on me, blinking in confusion. Then, suddenly, they got huge and round, as Twiggs looked back at Puck.

“Is…is that…?”

“It is.”

“Does she…?”

“No.”

“Oh, my.” Twiggs opened the door wide, beckoning with a sticklike arm. “Come in, come in. Quickly, now. Before the dryads catch sight of you, the irritating gossips.” He vanished inside, and Puck turned to me.

“I’ll never be able to fit in there,” I told him before he could say a word. “There’s no way I’m going to squeeze through, unless you’ve got a magic toadstool that’ll shrink me to the size of a wasp. And I’m not eating anything like that. I’ve seen *Alice in Wonderland*, you know.”

Puck grinned and took my hand.

“Close your eyes,” he told me, “and just walk.”

I did, half expecting to walk nose first into the tree, courtesy of a great Robbie-prank. When nothing happened, I almost peeked but thought better of it. The air turned warm, and I heard a door slam behind me, when Puck said I could open my eyes again.

I stood in a cozy, round room, the walls made of smooth red wood, the floor covered with mossy carpet. A flat rock on three stumps served as a table in the center of the room, displaying berries the size of soccer balls. A rope ladder hung on the far wall, and when my gaze followed it up, I nearly fainted. Dozens of insects crawled on the walls or hovered in the air high above us, for the trunk extended farther than I could see. Each bug

was the size of a cocker spaniel, and their rear ends glowed a luminescent yellow-green.

"You've been renovating, Twiggs," Puck said, sitting on a bundle of furs that passed for a couch. I looked closer and saw the head of a squirrel still attached to the skin, and had to look away. "This place was barely a hole in the tree when I saw it last."

Twiggs looked pleased. He was our height now—actually, I guess we were more *his* height—and up close he smelled of cedar and moss.

"Yes, I've grown quite fond of it," Twiggs said, walking over to the table. He picked up a knife and split a berry into thirds, arranging the pieces on wooden plates. "Still, I might have to move soon. The dryads whisper to me, tell me dark things. They say parts of the wyldwood are dying, vanishing more every day. No one knows what is causing it."

"You know what's causing it," Puck said, draping the squirrel tail over his lap. "We all do. This is nothing new."

"No." Twiggs shook his head. "Mortal disbelief has always taken a bit of the Nevernever, but not like this. This is…different. It's hard to explain. You'll see what I mean if you go any farther."

He handed us each a plate with a huge slab of red berry, half an acorn, and a pile of what looked like steamed white grubs. Despite the weirdness of the day, I was ravenous after hours of hiking. The berry wedge tasted tart and sweet, but I wasn't about to touch the maggoty-looking things and gave them all to Puck. After dinner, Twiggs made me a bed of squirrel hides and chipmunk fur, and though I was mildly grossed out, I fell asleep immediately.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, I DREAMED.

In my dream, my house was dark and still, the living room cloaked in shadow. A brief glimpse of the wall clock pronounced it 3:19 a.m. I floated through the living room past the kitchen and made my way up the stairs. The door to my room was closed, and I heard Luke's grizzly-bear snores coming from the master bedroom, but at the end of the hall, Ethan's door stood slightly ajar. I padded down the hallway and peeked in through the crack.

A stranger stood in Ethan's bedroom, a tall, lean figure dressed in silver and black. A boy, perhaps a little older than me, though it was impossible to tell his exact age. His body was youthful, but there was a stillness to him that hinted at something far older, something incredibly dangerous. With a shock, I recognized him as the boy on the horse, who had watched me through the forest that day. Why was he here now, in my house? How did he even get in? I toyed with the idea of confronting him, knowing this was all a dream, when I noticed something else, something that made my blood run cold. Thick, raven-wing hair tumbled to his shoulders, not quite covering the delicate, pointed ears.

He wasn't human. He was one of *them,* one of the fey. Standing in my house, in my brother's bedroom. I shuddered and began to ease back down the hall.

He turned then, looking right through me, and I would've gasped if I had the breath. He was gorgeous. More than gorgeous, he was beautiful. Regal beautiful, prince-of-a-foreign-nation beautiful. If he walked into my classroom during finals, students and teachers alike would be throwing themselves at his feet. Still, it was a cold, hard beauty, like that of a marble statue, inhuman and otherworldly. His slanted eyes, beneath long, jagged bangs, glimmered like chips of steel.

The changeling was nowhere to be seen, but I could hear faint noises coming from beneath the bed, the thud of a rapidly beating heart. The fey boy didn't seem to notice. He turned and placed one pale hand on the closet door, running his fingers down the faded wood. A ghost of a smile touched his lips.

In one smooth motion, he pushed the door open and walked through. The door shut behind him with a soft click, and he was gone.

Warily, I edged toward the closet door, keeping a careful eye on the space beneath the bed. I still heard muffled heartbeats, but nothing reached out to grab at me. I crossed the room without incident. As quietly as I could, I grasped the closet doorknob, turned it, and pulled the door open.

"My closet!" shrieked the bowler hat man, leaping out at me. "Mine!"

* * *

I SCREAMED AND JERKED myself awake.

For a moment, I glared wildly around the room, not knowing where I was. My heart pounded, and a cold sweat made my forehead clammy and slick. Scenes from a vivid nightmare danced across my mind: Ethan attacking me, Robbie making books fly around the room, a portal opening to an eerie new world.

A loud snore caught my attention, and I turned. Puck was sprawled out on the couch across from me, one arm flung over his eyes, his torso wrapped in a squirrel blanket.

My heart sank as the memories came flooding back. This wasn't a nightmare. I hadn't been dreaming this. Ethan was gone; a monster had replaced him. Robbie was a faery. And I was in the middle of the Nevernever searching for my brother, though I had no idea where to look, and no real hope of finding him.

I lay back, shivering. It was dark in Twiggs's home; the fireflies or whatever they were had stopped blinking and were now clinging to the walls, apparently asleep. The only light came from a flickering orange glow outside the window. Maybe Twiggs had the porch light on or something.

I bolted upright. That glow was actually candlelight, and above it, a face was peering into the room from outside. I opened my mouth to yell for Puck, when those blue eyes turned to me, and a face I knew all too well backed away into the night.

Ethan.

* * *

I SCRAMBLED OUT OF BED and sprinted across the floor, not bothering to put on my shoes. Puck snorted and shifted under his mound of furs, but I ignored him. Ethan was out there! If I could get to him, we could go home and forget this mess ever existed.

I yanked on the door and stepped out, scanning the woods for my brother. Only later did it occur to me that I was normal-size again, and that the door was still only a foot tall. All I could think about was Ethan and getting him home, getting us both home.

Darkness greeted me, but up ahead, I saw a flickering orange glow bouncing along, getting steadily farther away. "Ethan!" I called, my voice echoing into the stillness. "Ethan, wait!"

I started to run, my bare feet slapping against leaves and branches, slipping on rocks and mud. My toe hit something sharp, and it should've hurt, but my mind didn't register the pain. I could see him up ahead, a small figure making his way through the trees, holding a candle out before him. I ran as fast as I could, branches scraping my skin and tearing at my hair and clothes, but it seemed he was always the same distance away.

Then he stopped and looked back over his shoulder, smiling. The flickering candlelight cast his features in an eerie glow. I put on a burst of speed, and was just a few feet away when the ground suddenly dropped away from me. With a shriek, I plummeted like a stone, landing with a splash in icy water that closed over my head, flooding my nose and mouth.

Gasping, I floundered to the surface, my face stinging and my limbs already numb. Above me, a giggle rang out, and a glowing ball of light hovered overhead. It dangled there a moment, as if enjoying my humiliation, then sped away into the trees, high-pitched laughter echoing behind it.

Treading water, I gazed around. A muddy bank rose above me, slick and treacherous. There were several old trees growing out over the water, but their branches were too high for me to reach. I tried finding handholds in the bank to pull myself out, but my feet slipped in the mud, and the plants I grabbed came loose from the soil, dumping me into the lake with a noisy splash. I'd have to find another way out.

And then I heard another splash, farther out, and knew I wasn't alone.

Moonlight shone upon the water, painting everything in a relief of silver and black. Except for the buzzing of insects, the night was very still. On the far side of the lake, fireflies danced and whirled above the surface, some glowing pink and blue instead of yellow. Maybe I'd only imagined I'd heard a noise. Nothing seemed to be moving except for an old log drifting toward me.

I blinked and looked again. That log suddenly looked a lot like the top half of a horse's head, if a horse could swim like an alligator. And then I saw the dead white eyes, the thin shiny teeth, and panic rose up in me like a black tide.

"Puck!" I screamed, scrabbling at the bank. Mud tore loose in clumps; I'd find a handhold only to slip back again. I could feel the thing draw closer. "Puck, help me!"

I looked over my shoulder. The horse thing was only a few feet away, raising its neck out of the water to expose a mouthful of needlelike teeth. *Oh, God, I'm going to die! That thing is going to eat me! Somebody, help!* I clawed frantically at the bank—and felt a solid branch under my fingers. Grasping it, I yanked with all my strength, and felt the branch lift me out of the water, just as the horse monster lunged with a roar. Its wet, rubbery nose hit the bottom of my foot, jaws snapping with an evil *snick.* Then the branch flung me, gasping and crying, to the bank, and the horse thing sank below the surface once more.

Puck found me minutes later, curled into a ball several yards from the bank, wet to the skin and shaking like a leaf. His eyes were a mix of sympathy and exasperation as he pulled me upright.

"Are you all right?" He ran his hands up my arms, making sure I was still in one piece. "Still in there, princess? Talk to me."

I nodded, shivering. "I saw…Ethan," I stammered, trying to make sense of it all. "I followed him, but he turned into a light and flew away, and then this horse thing tried to *eat* me…." I trailed off. "That wasn't Ethan, was it? That was just another faery, playing with my emotions. And I fell for it."

Puck sighed and led me back down the trail. "Yeah," he muttered, glancing back at me. "Wisps are like that, making you see what you want to see, before leading you off the path. Though, that one seemed particularly spiteful, leading you right to a kelpie's pond. I suppose I could tell you never to go off alone, but I think it'd be a waste of breath. Oh, what the hell." He stopped and whirled around, stopping me in my tracks. "*Don't go off alone, princess.* Under any circumstances, understand? In this world, you're viewed as either a plaything or a light snack. Don't forget that."

"Yeah," I muttered. "Yeah, I get that now."

We continued down the trail. The door in the knobby tree was gone, but my sneakers and backpack lay outside, a clear sign our welcome was over. Shivering, I slipped the shoes over my bloody feet, hating this world and everything in it, wanting only to go home.

"Well," Puck said too cheerfully, "if you're done playing with will-o'-the-wisps and kelpies, I think we should continue. Oh, but do tell me the next time you want to have tea with an ogre. I'll be sure to bring my club."

I shot him a poisonous glare. He only grinned. Above us, the sky was lightening into that eerie gray twilight, silent and still as death, as we ventured deeper into the Nevernever.

CHAPTER SIX

The Wild Hunt

We hadn’t gone far when we came upon the patch of death in the middle of the forest.

The wyldwood was an eerie, quiet place, but it was still alive. Trees stood ancient and tall, plants bloomed, and splashes of vibrant color pierced the grayness, indicating life. Animals slipped through the trees, and strange creatures moved about in the shadows; you never got a clear view of them, but you knew they were there. You could feel them watching you.

Then, all of a sudden, the trees dropped away, and we stood at the edge of a barren clearing.

What little grass remained was yellow and dying, sparse patches of vegetation in the rocky ground. A few trees were scattered here and there, but they were withered, twisted things, empty of leaves and blackened. From a distance, the branches glinted, jagged and sharp, like weird metal sculptures. The hot wind smelled of copper and dust.

Puck stared at the dead forest for a long time. “Twiggs was right,” he muttered, staring at a withered tree. He made as if to touch one of the branches, but withdrew his hand with a shudder. “This isn’t natural. Something is poisoning the wyldwood.”

I reached up to touch one of the glittering branches, and jerked back with a gasp. “Ouch!”

Puck whirled on me. “What?”

I showed him my hand. Blood welled from a slice in my finger, thin as a paper cut. “The tree. It cut me.”

Puck examined my finger and frowned. “Metallic trees,” he mused, pulling a hankie from his pocket and wrapping it around my finger. “That’s new. If you see any steel dryads, be sure to tell me so I can run away screaming.”

I scowled and looked back at the tree. A single drop of blood glistened on the offending branch before dropping to the cracked earth. The twigs gleamed along their edges, as if honed to fine blades.

"Oberon must know about this," Puck muttered, crouching to examine a circle of dry grass. "Twiggs said it was spreading, but where is it coming from?" He rose quickly and swayed on his feet, putting out a hand to steady himself. I grabbed his arm.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine, princess." He nodded and gave me a pained smile. "A little perturbed about the state of my home, but what can you do?" He coughed and waved a hand in front of his face, as if he smelled something foul. "But this air is making me sick. Let's get out of here."

I sniffed, but smelled nothing bad, just dirt and the sharp tang of something metallic, like rust. But Puck was already leaving, his brow furrowed in anger or pain, and I hurried to catch up.

* * *

THE HOWLING BEGAN a few hours later.

Puck stopped in the middle of the trail, so abruptly that I nearly ran into him. He held up a hand, silencing me, before I could ask what was going on.

I heard it then, drifting over the breeze, a chorus of chilling bays and howls echoing behind us. My heart revved up, and I inched closer to my companion.

"What is that?"

"A hunt," Puck replied, looking off into the distance. He grimaced. "You know, I was just thinking we needed to be run down like rabbits and torn apart. My day just isn't complete without something trying to kill me."

I grew cold. "Something's after us?"

"You've never seen a wild hunt, have you." Puck groaned, running his fingers through his hair. "Damn. Well, this will complicate things. I was hoping to give you the grand tour of the Nevernever, princess, but I guess I'll have to put it on hold."

The baying grew closer, deep, throaty howls. Whatever was coming at us, it was big. "Shouldn't we run?" I whispered.

“You’ll never be able to outrun them,” Puck said, backing away. “They’ve got our scent now, and no mortal has ever escaped a wild hunt.” He sighed and dramatically flung his arm over his eyes. “I guess the sacrifice of my dignity is the only thing that will save us now. The things I endure for love. The Fates laugh at my torment.”

“What are you talking about?”

Puck smiled his eerie little grin and began to change.

His face stretched out, becoming longer and narrower, as his neck began to grow. His arms spasmed, fingers turning black and fusing into hooves. He arched his back, spine expanding, as his legs became hindquarters bunched with muscle. Fur covered his skin as he dropped to all fours, no longer a boy but a sleek gray horse with a shaggy mane and tail. The transformation had taken less than ten seconds.

I backed up, remembering my encounter with the thing in the water, but the dappled horse stamped its foreleg and swished its tail impatiently. I saw its eyes, shining like emeralds through the dangling forelocks, and my fear abated somewhat.

The howling was very close now, growing more and more frenzied. I ran to horse-Puck and threw myself on his back, grabbing his mane to heave myself up. Despite living on a farm, I’d only been on horseback once or twice, and it took me a couple of tries to get up. Puck snorted and tossed his head, annoyed with my lack of equestrian skills.

Struggling upright, I grasped the mane and saw Puck’s eyes roll back at me. Then, with a half rear, we plunged into the bushes and were off.

Riding bareback is not fun, especially when you have no control over your mount or where it’s going. I can honestly say this was the most terrifying ride of my life. The trees flashed by in a blur, branches slapped at me, and my legs burned from gripping the horse’s sides with my knees. My fingers were locked around his mane in a death grip, but that didn’t keep me from sliding halfway off whenever Puck changed direction. The wind shrieked in my ears, but I could still hear the terrifying bays of our pursuers, seemingly right on our heels. I didn’t dare look back.

I lost track of time. Puck never slowed or grew winded, but sweat darkened his body and made my seating slick and even more terrifying. My legs grew numb, and my hands seemed to belong to somebody else.

And then a huge black creature burst from the ferns to our right and lunged at the horse, snapping its jaws. It was a hound, bigger than any I’d

seen, with eyes of blue fire. Puck leaped aside to avoid it and reared, nearly spilling me to the forest floor. As I screamed, one foreleg slashed out, striking the hound in the chest midleap, and the dog yelped as it was hurled away.

The bushes exploded, and five more monstrous dogs spilled into the road. Surrounding us, they snarled and howled, snapping at the horse's legs and leaping back as he kicked at them. I was frozen, clinging to Puck's back, watching as those massive jaws clicked shut inches from my dangling feet.

Then, through the trees, I saw him, a lean figure on a huge black horse. The boy from my dream, the one I saw from the bus that day. His cruel, angelic face wore a smile as he drew back a large bow, an arrow glistening at the tip.

"Puck!" I screeched, knowing it was already too late. "Look out!"

The leaves above the hunter rustled, and then a large branch swept down, striking the boy in the arm just as he released the string. I felt the hum as the arrow zipped past my head and lodged into a pine tree. A spiderweb of frost spread out from where the arrow hit, and Puck's equine head whipped toward the source. The hunter fit another arrow to the string, and with a shrill whinny, Puck reared and leaped over the dogs, somehow avoiding their snapping teeth. When his hooves struck dirt again, he fled, the hounds barking and snapping at his heels.

An arrow whistled past, and I looked back to see the other horse pursuing us through the trees, its rider reaching back for another shot. Puck snorted and switched directions, nearly unseating me, plunging into a deeper part of the forest.

The trees here were monsters, and grew so close together that Puck had to swerve and weave around them. The hounds fell back, but I still heard their bays and occasionally caught a glimpse of their lean black bodies, hurtling through the undergrowth. The rider had disappeared, but I knew he still followed, his deadly arrows ready to pierce our hearts.

As we passed under the boughs of an enormous oak, Puck skidded to a halt, then bucked so violently that I flew off his back, my hands torn from his mane. I soared over his head, my stomach in my throat, and landed with a jarring impact in a crossbeam of connecting branches. My breath exploded from my lungs, and a stab of pain shot through my ribs, bringing

tears to my eyes. With a snort, Puck galloped on, the dogs following him into the shadows.

Moments later, the black horse and rider passed under the tree.

He slowed for a chilling heartbeat, and I held my breath, sure he would look up and see me. Then the excited howl of one of the dogs rang through the air, and he spurred his horse onward, following the hunt into the trees. In a moment, the sounds had faded. Silence fell through the branches, and I was alone.

"Well," someone said, very close by. "That was interesting."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Of Goblins and Grimalkin

I didn't scream this time, but came very close. As it was, I nearly fell out of the tree. Hugging a branch, I looked around wildly, trying to determine the owner of the voice, but I glimpsed nothing but leaves and sickly gray light shining through the branches.

"Where are you?" I gasped. "Show yourself."

"I am not hiding, little girl." The voice sounded amused. "Perhaps…if you open your eyes a bit wider. Like this."

Directly in front of me, not five feet away, a pair of saucerlike eyes opened up out of nowhere, and I stared into the face of an enormous gray cat.

"There," it purred, regarding me with a lazy yellow gaze. Its fur was long and wispy, blending perfectly into the tree and the entire landscape. "See me now?"

"You're a cat," I blurted stupidly, and I swore it arched a brow at me.

"In the crudest sense of the word, I suppose you could call me that." The feline rose, arching its back, before sitting and curling its plumed tail around its legs. Now that my shock was fading, I realized the cat was a *he,* not an it. "Others have called me Cait Sith, Grimalkin, and Devil's Cat, but since they all mean the same, I suppose you would be correct."

I gaped at him, but the sharp throb of my ribs returned my mind to other things. Namely, that Puck had left me alone in this world that viewed me as a snack, and I had no idea how to survive.

Shock and anger came first—Puck had really *left* me, to save his own skin—and after that came a fear so real and terrifying it was all I could do not to hug the branch and sob. How could Puck do this to me? I'd never make it out on my own. I'd end up as dessert for a carnivorous horse monster, torn apart by a pack of wolves, or hopelessly lost for decades, because I was sure time had ceased to exist and I'd be stuck here forever.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to be calm. *No, Robbie wouldn't do that to me. I'm sure of it.* Perhaps he ditched me to lead the hunt away, to make sure the hunt followed him and left me alone. Maybe he thought he was saving my life. Maybe he *had* saved my life. If that was the case, I hoped he came back soon; I didn't think I would get out of the Nevernever without him.

Grimalkin, or whatever his name was, continued to observe me as if I was a particularly interesting insect. I eyed him with new feelings of suspicion. Sure, he looked like an enormous, slightly plump house cat, but horses weren't generally meat-eaters and normal trees did not have little men living inside. This feline could be sizing me up for its next meal. I gulped and met his eerie, intelligent gaze head-on.

"W-what do you want?" I asked, thankful that my voice only trembled a little bit.

The cat didn't blink. "Human," he said, and if a cat could sound patronizing, this one nailed it, "think about the absurdity of that question. I am resting in my tree, minding my own business and wondering if I should hunt today, when you come flying in like a bean sidhe and scare off every bird for miles around. Then, you have the audacity to ask what *I* want." He sniffed and gave me a very catlike stare of disdain. "I am aware that mortals are rude and barbaric, but still."

"I'm sorry," I muttered automatically. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Grimalkin twitched his tail, and then turned to groom his hindquarters.

"Um," I continued after a moment of silence, "I was wondering if, maybe…you could help me."

Grimalkin paused midlick, then continued without looking up. "And why would I want to do that?" he asked, weaving words and grooming together without missing a beat. He still didn't look at me.

"I'm trying to find my brother," I replied, stung by Grimalkin's casual refusal. "He's been stolen by the Unseelie Court."

"Mmm. How terribly uninteresting."

"Please," I begged. "Help me. Give me a hint, or just point me in the right direction. Anything. I'll make it up to you, I swear."

Grimalkin yawned, showing off long canines and a bright pink tongue, and finally looked at me.

"Are you suggesting I do you a favor?"

"Yes. Look, I'll pay you back somehow, I promise."

He twitched an ear, looking amused. “Be careful throwing those words around so casually,” he warned. “Doing this will put you in my debt. Are you sure you wish to continue?”

I didn’t think about it. I was so desperate for help, I’d agree to anything. “Yes! Please, I need to find Puck. The horse I was riding when he bucked me off. He’s not really a horse, you know. He’s a—”

“I know what he is,” Grimalkin said quietly.

“Really? Oh, that’s great. Do you know where he could’ve gone?”

He fixed me with an unblinking stare, and then lashed his tail, once. Without a word, he rose, leaped gracefully onto a lower limb, and dropped to the ground. He stretched, arching his bushy tail over his spine, and vanished into the bushes without looking back.

I yelped, scrambling to untangle myself from the branches, wincing at the shard of pain between my ribs. I more or less fell out of the tree, landing with a thump on my backside that sparked a word Mom would ground me for. Dusting off my rear, I looked around for Grimalkin.

“Human.” He appeared like a gray ghost sliding out of the bushes, big glowing eyes the only evidence he was there. “This is our agreement. I will lead you to your Puck, and you will owe me a small favor in return, yes?”

Something about the way he said *agreement* caused my skin to prickle, but I nodded.

“Very well, then. Follow me. And do try to keep up.”

* * *

EASIER SAID THAN DONE.

If you’ve ever tried following a cat through a dense forest filled with briars, bushes, and tangled undergrowth, you’ll know how impossible it is. I lost track of the times Grimalkin vanished from sight, and I’d spend a few heart-pounding minutes searching for him, hoping I was going the right way. I always felt a desperate relief when I’d finally catch a glimpse of him slinking through the trees ahead, only to go through the same thing minutes later.

It didn’t help that my mind was occupied with what could’ve happened to Puck. Was he dead, shot down by the dark fey boy and ripped apart by

the hounds? Or had he really fled, already resolved that he wasn't coming back for me, and I could take my chances on my own?

Fear and anger welled, and my sullen thoughts shifted to my present guide. Grimalkin seemed to know the path we should take, but how did he know where Puck would be? Why should I trust him? What if the devious feline was leading me into some sort of trap?

As I was entertaining these bleak thoughts, Grimalkin disappeared again.

Dammit, I'm going to tie a bell around the stupid thing's neck if it doesn't stop that. The light was fading, and the forest was even more gray. I stopped and squinted at the bushes, searching for the elusive feline. Up ahead, the bushes rustled, which surprised me. Grimalkin had been completely silent up until now.

"Human!" whispered a familiar voice, somewhere above me. "Hide!"

"What?" I said, but it was too late. Twigs snapped, bushes parted, and a slew of creatures spilled into view.

They were short, ugly things, standing two to three feet high, with knobby yellow-green skin and bulbous noses. Their ears were large and pointed. They wore tattered clothing and carried bone-tipped spears in yellow claws. Their faces were mean and cruel, with beady eyes and mouths full of broken, jagged teeth.

For a moment, they stopped, blinking in surprise. Then the whole pack of them screeched and swarmed forward, jabbing at me with their spears.

"What is it? What is it?" snarled one, as I cringed away from the stabbing points. Laughter and jeers filled the air as they surrounded me.

"It's an elf," hissed another, giving me a toothy leer. "An elf what lost its ears, maybe."

"No, a goat-girl," cried yet a third. "Good eatin', them."

"She ain't no goat, cretin! Lookit, she ain't got no 'ooves!"

I trembled and looked around for an escape route, but wherever I turned, those sharp bony points were thrust at me.

"Take 'er to the chief," someone suggested at last. "The chief'll know what she is, and if she's safe to eat."

"Right! The chief'll know!"

A couple of them rushed me from behind, and I felt a blow to the backs of my knees. With a shriek, I collapsed, and the whole pack of them swarmed me, hooting and hollering. I screamed and kicked, flailing my

arms, thrashing under the weight of the creatures. A few went flying into the bushes, but they bounced up with shrill cries and pounced on me again. Blows rained down on me.

Then something struck me behind the head, making lights explode behind my eyes, and I knew nothing for a time.

* * *

I WOKE WITH THE MOTHER OF ALL headaches doing a jig inside my skull. I was in a sitting position, and something that felt like broom handles pressed uncomfortably into my back. Groaning, I probed around my skull, searching for anything cracked or broken. Except for a massive lump just above my hairline, everything seemed to be intact.

When I was sure I was still in one piece, I opened my eyes.

And regretted it immediately.

I was in a cage. A very small cage, made of branches lashed together with leather bindings. There was barely enough room for me to raise my head, and when I moved, something sharp poked me in the arm, drawing blood. I looked closer and saw that many of the branches were covered in thorns about an inch long.

Beyond the bars, several mud huts sat in no particular arrangement around a large fire pit. The squat, ugly little creatures scampered to and fro around the camp, fighting, arguing, or gnawing on bones. A group of them sat around my backpack, pulling things out one by one. My extra clothes they just tossed in the dirt, but the chips and bottle of aspirin they immediately ripped open, tasted, and squabbled over. One managed to open the soda can and spray fizzy liquid everywhere, to the angry shrieks of his companions.

One of them, shorter than its fellows and wearing a muddy red vest, saw that I was awake. With a hiss, it scuttled up to the cage and thrust its spear through the bars. I cringed back, but there was nowhere to go; the thorns stung my flesh as the spear jabbed me in the thigh.

“Ouch, stop it!” I cried, which only encouraged it further. Cackling, it poked and prodded me, until I reached down and grabbed the head of the spear. Snarling and cursing, the creature tried yanking it back, and we held a ridiculous tug-of-war until another goblin saw what we were doing. It

rushed up and stabbed me through the bars on the opposite side, and I released the spear with a yelp.

"Greertig, stop pokin' the meat," snapped the second, taller creature. "Ain't no good if all the blood runs out."

"Pah, I was just makin' sure it was tender, is all." The other snorted and spit on the ground, then glared at me with greedy red eyes. "Why we waitin' about? Let's just eat it already."

"The chief ain't back yet." The taller creature looked at me, and to my horror, a long string of drool dripped down its chin. "He 'as to make sure this thing is safe to eat."

They gave me a last longing glare, then stomped back to the fire pit, arguing and spitting at each other. I drew my knees to my chest and tried to control my shaking.

"If you are going to cry, please do it quietly," murmured a familiar voice at my back. "Goblins can smell fear. They will only torment you more if you give them a reason."

"Grimalkin?" Squirming in my cage, I glanced around to see the nearly invisible gray cat crouched by one corner. His eyes were narrowed in concentration, and his strong, sharp teeth were chewing at one of the leather bindings.

"Idiot, do not look at me!" he spat, and I quickly glanced away. The cat growled, tugging on one of the bars. "Goblins are not very smart, but even they will notice if you start talking to nobody. Just sit tight and I will have you out of here in a minute."

"Thank you for coming back," I whispered, watching two goblins fight over some unfortunate beast's rib cage. The quarrel ended when one goblin bashed the other over the head with a club and scampered off with its trophy. The other goblin lay stunned for a moment, then leaped to its feet in pursuit.

Grimalkin sniffed and began chewing the bindings again. "Do not put yourself even more in debt," he said around a mouthful of leather. "We have already made a contract. I agreed to take you to Puck, and I always keep my end of the bargain. Now, shut up so I can work."

I nodded and fell silent, but suddenly there was a great cry in the goblin camp. Goblins leaped to their feet, hissing and scuttling about, as a large creature sauntered out of the forest into the middle of the encampment.

It was another goblin, only bigger, broader, and meaner-looking than its fellows. It wore a crimson uniform with brass buttons, the sleeves rolled up and the tails dragging along the ground. It also carried a curved blade, rusty bronze and jagged along the edge. It snarled and swaggered into the camp, the other goblins cringing away from it, and I knew this must be the chief.

"Shut up, ya pack of jabberin' dogs," the chief roared, aiming a blow at a couple of goblins who didn't get out of his way quick enough. "Worthless, the lot of ya! I been hard at work, raidin' the borderlands, an' what have you lot got to show me, eh? Nothin'! Not even a rabbit fer the stewpot. Ya make me sick."

"Chief, chief!" cried several goblins at once, dancing around and pointing. "Lookit, lookit! We caught something! We brought it back for you!"

"Eh?" The chief's gaze flashed across the camp, his evil eyes fastening on me. "What's this? Did you miserable louts actually manage to catch a high an' mighty elf?"

He sauntered toward the cage. I couldn't help myself and snuck a quick glance at Grimalkin, hoping the cat would flee. But Grimalkin was nowhere to be seen.

Swallowing hard, I looked up and met the chief's beady red eyes.

"What in Pan's privates is this?" the goblin chief snorted. "This ain't no elf, you cretins. Not unless she bartered away her ears! Besides—" he sniffed the air, wrinkling his snotty nose "—it smells different. Ey, funny elf-thing." He smacked the cage with the flat of his sword, making me jump. "What are ya?"

I took a deep breath as the rest of the goblin tribe crowded around the cage, watching me, some curious, most hungry-looking. "I'm a…an otaku faery," I said, drawing a confused scowl from the chief and bewildered looks from the rest of the camp. Whispers began to erupt from the crowd, gaining strength like wildfire.

"A what?"

"Ain't never 'erd of that before."

"Is it tasty?"

"Can we eat it?"

The chief frowned. "I admit, I ain't never come across no otaku faery before," he growled, scratching his head. "Ah, but that ain't important. Ya

look young an' juicy enough, I figure you'll feed me crew fer several nights. So, what's yer preference, otaku?" He grinned and raised his sword. "Boiled alive, or skewered over the fire?"

I clenched my hands to stop them from shaking. "Either way is fine with me," I said, trying to sound casual. "Tomorrow it won't matter at all. There's a deadly poison running through my veins. If you swallow one bite of me, your blood will boil, your insides will melt, and you'll dissolve into a steaming pile of muck." Hisses went around the tribe; several goblins bared their teeth at me and snarled. I crossed my arms and raised my chin, staring down the goblin chief. "So, go ahead and eat me. Tomorrow you'll be a big puddle of goo, sinking into the ground."

Many of the goblins were backing away now, but the chief stood firm. "Shut up, you sniveling lot!" he snarled at the nervous goblins. Giving me a sour look, he spat on the ground. "So, we can't eat ya." He sounded unimpressed. "Pity, that is. But don't think that'll save ya, girl. If yer so deadly, I'll just kill ya now, except I'll bleed ya slow, so yer poison blood won't hurt me. Then I'll skin ya and hang yer hide on me door, and use yer bones fer arrowheads. As me grandmother always said, waste not."

"Wait!" I cried as he stepped forward, raising his sword. "It—it would be a shame for me to go to waste like that," I stammered as he glared at me with suspicious eyes. "There *is* a way to purify the poison from my blood so that I'm safe to eat. If I'm going to die anyway, I'd rather be eaten than tortured."

The goblin chief smiled. "I knew you'd see it my way," he gloated. Turning to his minions, he puffed out his chest. "See there, dogs? Yer chief is still lookin' out fer ya! We feast tonight!"

A raucous cheer went up, and the chief turned to me again, leveling his sword at my face. "So then, otaku girl. What's yer secret?"

I thought quickly. "To cleanse the poison from my blood, you have to boil me in a big pot with several purifying ingredients. Spring water from a waterfall, an acorn from the tallest oak tree, blue mushrooms, and… um…"

"Don't tell me ya forgot," the chief said in a menacing tone, and poked the sword tip through the bars of the cage. "Maybe I can help ya remember."

"Pixie dust!" I blurted desperately, making him blink. "From a live pixie," I added. "Not dead. If it dies, the recipe won't work." I prayed that

there were pixies in this world. If not, I was as good as dead.

"Huh," the chief grunted, and turned to the waiting tribe. "All right, louts, you heard it! I want those ingredients back here before dawn! Anyone who don't work, don't eat! Now, get movin'."

The tribe scattered. Hissing, jabbering, and cursing at one another, they vanished into the forest until only one guard remained, leaning on a crooked spear.

The chief eyed me warily and pointed his sword through the bars.

"Don't think ya can trick me by givin' false ingredients," he threatened. "I plan to cut off yer finger, toss it in the stew, an' have one of me mates taste it. If he dies, or melts into a puddle, it be a long, slow death fer you. Understand?"

Chilled, I nodded. I knew none of the goblins would die, because my claim of poison and the recipe for the stew was, of course, completely bogus. Still, I wasn't thrilled about losing one of my fingers. *Terrified* would be a better word.

The chief spat and looked around the near-deserted campsite. "Bah, none of them dogs will know how to catch a piskie," he muttered, scratching his ear. "They'd probably eat the damn thing if they caught it. Arg, I'd better find one myself. Bugrat!"

A few yards away, the lone guard snapped to attention. "Chief?"

"Keep an eye on our dinner," the chief ordered, sheathing his sword. "If it tries to escape, cut off its feet."

"You got it, chief."

"I'm goin' huntin'." The chief shot me one last warning glare, then bounded off into the undergrowth.

"That was clever," Grimalkin murmured, sounding reluctantly impressed.

I nodded, too breathless to answer. After a moment, the sound of chewing recommenced.

It took a while, during which time I chewed my lip, wrung my hands, and tried not to ask how Grimalkin was doing every twenty seconds. As the minutes stretched, I cast anxious glances at the trees and the forest, expecting the chief or the goblin horde to come bursting through. The lone guard stalked the perimeter of the camp, shooting me an evil look as it walked by and triggering Grimalkin's vanishing act. Finally, on the eighth or ninth circle, Grimalkin's voice floated up after the guard had passed.

“There. I think you can get through now.”

I wiggled around as best I could. Peering at the bars, I saw that several of the bindings were chewed in half, testament to Grim’s strong jaws and sharp teeth.

“Come on, come on, let us go,” Grimalkin hissed, lashing its tail. “You can gawk later—they are coming back.”

Bushes rustled around me, and harsh laughter filled the air, getting closer. Heart pounding, I grasped the bars, being careful to avoid the thorns, and pushed. They resisted me, held in place by interlocking branches, and I shoved harder. It was like trying to push through a heavy briar patch; the bars shifted a bit, teasing me with freedom, but stubbornly gave little ground.

The goblin chief stepped out of the trees, followed by three more goblins. He clutched something small and wriggling in one fist, and his followers’ arms were filled with pale blue toadstools.

“Mushrooms were the easy part,” the chief snorted, casting a derisive glance back at the others. “Any idiot can collect plants. If I’d left these dogs ta catch a piskie, we’d be nothin’ but bones before—”

He stopped, and his gaze snapped to me. For a moment, he stood there, blinking, then his eyes narrowed and he clenched his fists. The creature in his grasp gave a high-pitched squeal as the goblin crushed the life from it and flung it to the ground. With a roar of outrage, the chief drew his sword. I screamed and shoved on the cage as hard as I could.

With a great snapping of twigs and thorns, the back of the cage came loose, and I was free.

“Run!” Grimalkin yelled, and I didn’t need encouragement. We bolted into the forest, the enraged cries of the goblins on our heels.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Moonlit Grove

I tore through the forest, branches and leaves slapping at my face, following Grimalkin's shadowy form as best I could. Behind me, twigs snapped, snarls echoed, and the angry cursing of the goblin chief grew louder in my ears. My breath rasped in my chest, my lungs burned, but I forced my legs to keep moving, knowing that if I stumbled or fell, I would die.

"This way!" I heard Grimalkin shout, darting into a patch of bramble. "If we can get to the river, we will be safe! Goblins cannot swim!"

I followed him into the briars, bracing myself for thorns tearing at my flesh and ripping at my clothes. But the branches parted easily for me, as they had when I was with Puck, and I slipped through with minimal scrapes. As I exited the bramble patch, a great crashing noise echoed behind me, followed by loud yelps and swearing. It seemed the goblins weren't finding the path as easy to navigate, and I thanked whatever forces were at work as I continued on.

Over the roaring in my ears and my own ragged breaths, I heard the sound of rushing water. When I staggered out of the trees, the ground abruptly dropped away into a rocky embankment. A great river loomed before me, nearly a hundred yards across, with no bridges or rafts in sight. I couldn't see the other side because a coiling wall of mist hovered over the water, stretching as far as I could see. Grimalkin stood at the edge, almost invisible in the fog, lashing his tail impatiently.

"Hurry!" he ordered as I stumbled down the bank, exhaustion burning my legs. "The Erlking's territory is on the other side. You must swim, quickly!"

I hesitated. If monster horses lurked in quiet ponds, what would great black rivers hold? Images of giant fish and sea monsters flashed across my mind.

Something flew past my arm, startling me, bouncing off the rocks with a clatter. It was a goblin spear, the bone-white tip gleaming against the stones. The blood drained from my face. I could either stay put and be skewered, or take my chances with the river.

Scrambling down the bank, I flung myself into the water.

The cold shocked me, and I gasped, struggling against the current as it pulled me downstream. I'm a fairly strong swimmer, but my limbs felt like jelly, and my lungs were gasping to suck in enough oxygen. I floundered and went under, snorting water up my nose and making my lungs scream. The current pulled me farther away, and I fought down panic.

Another lance zipped over my head. I looked back and saw the goblins following me along the bank, scrambling over the rocks and hurling spears. Terror shot through me, giving me new strength. I struck out for the opposite shore, arms and legs churning madly, fighting the current for all I was worth. More spears splashed around me, but thankfully, the goblins' aim seemed to match their intelligence.

As I drew close to the wall of mist, something struck my shoulder with jarring force, sending a flare of agony across my back. I gasped and went under. Pain paralyzed my arm, and as the undertow dragged me down, I was sure I was going to die.

Something grabbed my waist, and I felt myself pulled upward. My head broke water and I gasped air into my starving lungs, fighting the blackness on the edge of my vision. As my senses returned, I realized someone was pulling me through the water, but I could see nothing around me because of the mist. Then my feet touched solid ground, and the next thing I knew, I was lying in the grass, the sun shining warmly on my face. My eyes were closed, and I cracked them open cautiously.

A girl's face hovered over mine, blond hair brushing my cheeks, wide green eyes both anxious and curious. Her skin was the color of summer grass, and tiny scales gleamed silver around her neck. She grinned, and her teeth flashed as sharp and pointed as an eel's.

A scream welled in my throat, but I swallowed it down. This…girl?… had just saved my life, even if it meant she wanted to eat me herself. It would be rude if I just shrieked in her face, plus any sudden moves might spark an aggressive feeding frenzy. I couldn't show any fear. With a deep breath, I sat up, wincing as a bolt of pain lanced through my shoulder.

“Um…hello,” I stammered, watching her sit back and blink. I was surprised that she had legs instead of a fishtail, though webbing spanned her fingers and toes, and her claws were very, very sharp. A small white dress clung to her body, the hem of it dripping wet. “I’m Meghan. What’s your name?”

She cocked her head, reminding me of a cat that couldn’t decide whether to eat the mouse or play with it. “You’re funny-looking,” she stated, her voice rippling like water over rocks. “What are you?”

“Me? I’m human.” The moment I said it, I wished I hadn’t. In the old fairy tales, which I was remembering more and more of, humans were always food, playthings, or the tragic love interest. And as I was quickly discovering, the inhabitants here had no qualms about eating a speaking, sentient creature. I held the same rung on the food chain as a rabbit or squirrel. It was a scary, rather humbling thought.

“Human?” The girl cocked her head the other way. I caught a glimpse of pink gills under her chin. “My sisters told me stories of humans. They said they sometimes sing to them to lure them underwater.” She grinned, showing off her sharp needle-teeth. “I’ve been practicing. Want to hear?”

“No, she certainly does not.” Grimalkin came stalking through the grass, bottlebrush tail held high in the air. The feline was soaked, water dripping off his fur in rivulets, and he did not look pleased.

“Shoo,” he growled at the girl, and she drew back, hissing and baring her teeth. Grimalkin seemed unimpressed. “Go away. I am in no mood to play games with nixies. Now, get!”

The girl hissed once more and fled, sliding into the water like a seal. She glared at us from the middle of the river, then vanished in a spray of mist.

“Irritating sirens,” Grimalkin fumed, turning to glare at me, eyes narrowed. “You did not promise her anything, did you?”

“No.” I bristled. I was happy to see the cat, of course, but didn’t appreciate the attitude. It wasn’t my fault the goblins were chasing us. “You didn’t have to scare her off, Grim. She did save my life.”

The cat flicked his tail, spraying me with drops. “The only reason she pulled you out of the river was curiosity. If I had not come along, she would have either sung you underwater to drown, or she would have eaten you. Fortunately, nixies are not very brave. They would much prefer a fight beneath the water where they have all the advantages. Now, I suggest

we find somewhere to rest. You are wounded, and the swim took a lot out of me. If you can walk, I encourage you to do so."

Grimacing, I pulled myself to my feet. My shoulder felt like it was on fire, but if I held my arm close to my chest, the pain receded to a dull throb. Biting my lip, I followed Grimalkin, away from the river and into the lands of the Erlking.

* * *

EVEN WET, TIRED, AND IN PAIN, I still had the energy to gawk. Pretty soon, my eyes felt huge and swollen from staring so long without blinking. The land on this side of the river was a far cry from the eerie gray forest of the wild fey. Rather than colors being faded and washed out, everything was overly vibrant and vivid. The trees were too green, the flowers screamingly colorful. Leaves glittered, razor sharp in the light, and petals flashed like jewels as they caught the sun. It was all very beautiful, but I couldn't shake the feeling of apprehension as I took it in. Everything seemed…fake somehow, as if this was a fancy coating over reality, as if I wasn't looking at the real world at all.

My shoulder burned, and the skin around it felt puffy and hot. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the throbbing heat leeched down my arm and spread through my back. Sweat ran down my face, making my eyes sting, and my legs trembled.

I finally collapsed under a pine tree, gasping, my body hot and cold at the same time. Grimalkin circled around and trotted back, his tail held high in the air. For a moment, there were two Grimalkins, but then I blinked sweat out of my eyes and there was only one.

"There's something wrong with me," I panted as the cat regarded me coolly. His eyes abruptly floated off his face and hovered in the air between us. I blinked, hard, and they were normal again.

Grimalkin nodded. "Dreamlace venom," he said, to my confusion. "Goblins poison their spears and arrows. When the hallucinations start coming, you do not have long."

I took a ragged breath. "Isn't there a cure?" I whispered, ignoring the fern that started crawling toward me like a leafy spider. "Someone who can help?"

“That is where we are going.” Grimalkin stood, looking back at me. “Not far now, human. Keep your eyes on me, and try to ignore everything else, no matter what comes at you.”

It took three tries to get back on my feet, but at last I managed to pull myself up and hold my balance long enough to take a step. And then another. And another. I followed Grimalkin for miles, or at least it seemed that way. After the first tree lunged at me, rattling its branches, it became difficult to concentrate. I nearly lost Grimalkin several times, as the landscape twisted into terrifying versions of itself, reaching for me with twiggy fingers. Distant shapes beckoned from the shadows, calling my name. The ground turned into a writhing mass of spiders and centipedes, crawling up my legs. A deer stepped into the middle of the path, cocked its head, and asked me for the time.

Grimalkin paused. Jumping onto a rock, ignoring the boulder’s indignant shouts for him to get off, he turned to face me. “You are on your own from here, human,” he said, or at least that’s what I heard over the rock’s bellowing. “Just keep walking until *he* shows himself. He owes me a favor, but also tends to distrust humans, so the chances that he will help you are about fifty-fifty. Unfortunately, he is the only one who can cure you now.”

I frowned, trying to follow his words, but they buzzed around like flies and I couldn’t follow. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You will know what I mean when you find him, if you find him.” The cat cocked his head and gave me a scrutinizing look. “You are still a virgin, right?”

I decided that last part was a figment of my delirium. Grimalkin slipped away before I could ask him anything else, leaving me confused and disoriented. Waving away a swarm of wasps that circled my head, I stumbled after him.

A vine reached up and snagged my foot. I fell, bursting through the ground, to land on a bed of yellow flowers. They turned their tiny faces to me and screamed, filling the air with pollen. I sat up and found myself in a moonlit grove, the ground carpeted with flowers. Trees danced, rocks laughed at me, and tiny lights zipped through the air.

My limbs were numb, and I was suddenly very tired. Blackness crawled on the edge of my vision. I lay back against a tree and watched the

lights swarm through the air. Vaguely, some part of me realized I'd stopped breathing, but the rest of me didn't really care.

A strand of moonlight broke away from the trees and glided toward me. I watched without interest, knowing it was a hallucination. As it got closer, it shimmered and changed shape, sometimes resembling a deer, sometimes a goat or a pony. A horn of light grew from its head, as it regarded me with ancient golden eyes.

"Hello, Meghan Chase."

"Hello," I replied, though my lips didn't move and I had no breath to speak. "Am I dead?"

"Not quite." The moonlight creature laughed softly, shaking its mane. "It is not your destiny to die here, princess."

"Oh." I pondered that, my thoughts swirling muzzily in my head. "How do you know who I am?"

The creature snorted, swishing a lionlike tail. "Those of us who watch the sky have seen your coming for a long time, Meghan Chase. Catalysts always burn brightly, and your light shines unlike any I've seen before. Now, the only question remaining is, what path will you take, and how will you choose to rule?"

"I don't understand."

"You aren't supposed to." The moonlight creature stepped forward and breathed. Silver air washed over me, and my eyelids fluttered shut. "Now, sleep, my princess. Your father awaits you. And tell Grimalkin that I choose to help, not as a favor, but for reasons of my own. The next time he calls on me will be the last."

I didn't want to sleep. Questions swirled to mind, buzzing and insistent. I opened my mouth to ask about my father, but the creature's horn touched my chest, sending a rush of heat through my body. I gasped and opened my eyes.

The moonlit grove had disappeared. A meadow surrounded me, tall grasses waving in the wind, a faint pink glow lighting the horizon. The last traces of a weird dream fluttered across my mind: moving trees, talking deer, a creature made of frost and moonlight. I wondered what was real, and what had just been the effects of the delirium. I felt fine now—better than fine. Some of it must have been real.

Then the grass rustled, as if something crept up behind me.

I whipped around and saw my backpack sitting a few feet away, bright orange against the green. Snatching it up, I pulled it open. The food was gone, of course, as were the flashlight and the aspirin, but my extra clothes were there, crumpled into a ball and sopping wet.

Confused, I stared at the pack. What could have brought it here all the way from the goblins' camp? I didn't think Grimalkin would have gone back for it, especially since that would have meant crossing the river again. But, here was my pack—moldy and wet, but still here. At least the clothes would dry.

And then I remembered something else. Something that made me wince.

Unzipping the side pouch, I pulled out my dripping, water-logged iPod.

"Dammit." I sighed, looking it over. The screen was blurry and warped, totally ruined, a year's savings down the drain. I shook it and heard water sloshing inside. Not good. Just to be sure, I plugged in the headphones and turned it on. Nothing. Not even a buzz. It was well and truly dead.

Sadly, I replaced it in the pocket and zipped it back up. So much for listening to Aerosmith in Faeryland. I was about to go looking for Grimalkin when a giggle overhead made me glance up.

Something crouched in the branches. Something small and misshapen, watching me with glowing green eyes. I saw the outline of a sinewy body, long thin arms, and goblinlike ears. Only it wasn't a goblin. It was too small for that, and more disturbing, it seemed intelligent.

The monster saw me watching it and offered a slow smile. Its teeth, pointed and razor sharp, glimmered with neon-blue fire, just before it vanished. And I don't mean it scuttled off or faded away like a ghost. It *blipped* out of sight, like the image on a computer screen.

Like that thing I saw in the computer lab.

Definitely time to go.

I found Grimalkin sunning himself on a rock, eyes shut, purring deep in his throat. He cracked open a lazy eye as I came rushing up.

"We're leaving," I told him, shrugging into my backpack. "You're going to take me to Puck, I'm going to rescue Ethan, and we're going home. And if I never see another goblin, nixie, cait sith or whatever, it'll be too soon."

Grimalkin yawned. Infuriatingly, he took his sweet time getting up, stretching, yawning, scratching his ears, making sure every hair was in place. I stood, nearly dancing with impatience, wanting to grab him by the scruff of the neck, though I knew I'd probably be shredded for it.

"Arcadia, the Summer Court, is close," Grimalkin said as he finally deemed himself ready to start. "Remember, you owe me a small debt when we find your Puck." He leaped from the rock to the ground, looking back at me solemnly. "I will claim my price as soon as we find him. Don't forget."

We walked for hours, through a forest that seemed to be constantly closing in on us. In the corners of my eyes, branches, leaves, even tree trunks moved and shifted, reaching out for me. Sometimes I'd pass a tree or bush, only to see the same one farther down the path. Laughter echoed from the canopy overhead, and strange lights winked and bobbed in the distance. Once, a fox peeked at us from beneath a fallen log, a human skull perched on its head. None of this bothered Grimalkin, who trotted down the forest trail with his tail up, never looking back to see if I followed.

Night had descended, and the enormous blue moon was high overhead, when Grimalkin stopped, flattening his ears. With a hiss, he slipped off the trail and vanished into a patch of ferns. Startled, I looked up to see a pair of riders approaching, glowing bright in the darkness. Their mounts were gray and silver, and the hooves didn't touch the ground as they broke into a canter, straight for me.

I stood my ground as they approached. There was no use trying to outrun hunters on horseback. As they got closer, I saw the riders: tall and elegant, with sharp features and coppery hair tied into a tail. They wore silver mail that flashed in the moonlight, and carried long, thin blades at their sides.

The horses surrounded me, snorting steam, their breath hanging in the air like clouds. Atop their mounts, the knights glared down with unnatural beauty, their features too fine and delicate to be real. "Are you Meghan Chase?" one of them asked, his voice high and clear like a flute. His eyes flashed, the color of the summer sky.

I swallowed. "Yes."

"You will come with us. His Majesty King Oberon, Lord of the Summer Court, has sent for you."

CHAPTER NINE

In the Seelie Court

I rode in front of an elven knight, who had one arm wrapped securely around my waist while the other held the reins. Grimalkin dozed in my lap, a warm, heavy weight, and refused to talk to me. The knights wouldn't answer any of my questions, either: where we were going, if they knew Puck, or why King Oberon wanted me. I didn't even know if I was a prisoner or a guest of these people, though I supposed I would find out soon enough. The horses flew over the forest floor, and I saw up ahead that the trees were beginning to thin.

We broke through the tree line, and ahead of us rose an enormous mound. It towered above us in ancient, grassy splendor, the pinnacle seeming to brush the sky. Thorny trees and brambles grew everywhere, especially near the top, so the whole thing resembled a large bearded head. Around it grew a hedge bristling with thorns, some longer than my arm. The knights spurred their horses toward the thickest part of the hedge. I wasn't surprised when the brambles parted for them, forming an arch that they rode beneath, before settling back with a loud crunching sound.

I *was* surprised when the horses rode straight at the side of the hill without slowing, and I clutched Grimalkin tightly, making him growl in protest. The mound neither opened up nor moved aside in any way; we rode *into* the hill and through, sending a shiver all the way down my spine to my toes.

Blinking, I gazed around at total chaos.

A massive courtyard stretched before me, a great circular platform of ivory pillars, marble statues, and flowering trees. Fountains hurled geysers of water into the air, multicolored lights danced over the pools, and flowers in the full spectrum of the rainbow bloomed everywhere. Strains of music reached my ears, a combination of harps and drums, strings and flutes, bells and whistles, somehow lively and melancholy at the same time. It brought tears to my eyes, and suddenly all I wanted to do was slide

off the horse and dance until the music consumed me and I was lost in it. Thankfully, Grimalkin muttered something like “Get hold of yourself” and dug his claws into my wrist, snapping me out of it.

Faeries were everywhere, sitting on the marble steps or benches, dancing together in small groups, or just wandering around. My eyes could not take it in fast enough. A man with a bare chest and shaggy legs ending in hooves winked at me from the shade of a bush. A willowy girl with green-tinted skin stepped out of a tree, scolding a child hanging from the branches. The boy stuck out his tongue, flicked his squirrel tail, and darted higher into the foliage.

I felt a sharp tug on my hair. A tiny figure hovered near my shoulder, gossamer wings buzzing like a hummingbird’s. I gasped, but the knight holding me didn’t so much as glance at it. She grinned and held out what looked like a plump grape, except the skin of the fruit was bright blue and speckled with orange. I smiled politely and nodded, but she frowned and pointed at my hand. Confused, I held up my palm. She dropped the fruit into it, gave a delighted giggle, and sped away.

“Be careful,” Grimalkin rumbled, as a heady aroma rose from the little fruit, making my mouth water. “Eating or drinking certain things in Faery could have unpleasant consequences for someone like you. Do not eat anything. In fact, until we find your Puck, I would not talk to anyone. And whatever you do, do not accept gifts of any sort. This is going to be a long night.”

I swallowed and dropped the fruit into one of the fountains as we rode by, watching huge green-and-gold fish swarm around it, mouths gaping. The knights scattered faeries as we rode through the courtyard toward a high stone wall with a pair of silver gates in front. Two massive creatures, each ten feet tall, blue-skinned and tusked, guarded the doors. Their eyes glimmered yellow beneath ropey black hair and heavy brows. Even dressed up, their arms and chests bulging through the fabric of their red uniforms, popping the brass buttons, they were still terrifying. “Trolls,” muttered Grimalkin, as I shrank against the unyielding frame of the elven knight. “Be thankful we’re in Oberon’s land. The Winter Court employs ogres.”

The knights stopped and let me down a few feet from the gate. “Be courteous when you speak to the Erlking, child,” the knight I’d ridden with

told me, and wheeled his mount away. I was left facing two giant trolls with nothing but a cat and my backpack.

Grimalkin squirmed in my arms, and I let him drop to the stones. “Come on.” The cat sighed, lashing his tail. “Let us meet Lord Pointy Ears and get this over with.”

The two trolls blinked as the cat fearlessly approached the gate, looking like a gray bug scuttling around their clawed feet. One of them moved, and I braced myself, expecting him to stomp Grimalkin into kitty pudding. But the troll only reached over and pulled the gate open as the other did the same on his side. Grimalkin shot me a backward glance, twitched his tail, and slipped through the archway. I took a deep breath, smoothed down my tangled hair, and followed.

The forest grew thick on the other side of the gates, as if the wall had been built to keep it in check. A tunnel of flowering trees and branches stretched away from me, fully in bloom, the scent so overpowering I felt light-headed.

The tunnel ended with a curtain of vines, opening up into a vast clearing surrounded by giant trees. The ancient trunks and interlocking branches made a sort of cathedral, a living palace of giant columns and a leafy vaulted ceiling. Even though I knew we were underground, and it was night outside, sunlight dappled the forest floor, slanting in through tiny cracks in the canopy. Glowing balls of light danced in the air, and a waterfall cascaded gently into a nearby pool. The colors here were dazzling.

A hundred faeries clustered around the middle of the clearing, dressed in brilliant, alien finery. By the look of it, I guessed these were the nobles of the court. Their hair hung long and flowing, or was styled in impossible fashions atop their heads. Satyrs, easily recognized by their shaggy goat legs, and furry little men padded back and forth, serving drinks and trays of food. Slender hounds with moss-green fur milled about, hoping for dropped crumbs. Elven knights in silvery chain armor stood stiffly around the room; a few held hawks or even tiny dragons.

In the center of this gathering sat a pair of thrones, seemingly grown out of the forest floor and flanked by two liveried centaurs. One of the thrones stood empty, except for a caged raven on one of the arms. The great black bird cawed and beat its wings against its prison, its beady eyes bright and green. However, in the throne on the left…

King Oberon, for I could only assume this was him, sat with his fingers steepled together, gazing out at the crowd. Like the rest of the fey nobles, he was tall and slender, with silver hair that fell to his waist and eyes like green ice. An antlered crown rested on his brow, casting a long shadow over the court, like grasping talons. Power radiated from him, as subtle as a thunderstorm.

Over the colorful sea of nobles, our gazes met. Oberon raised one eyebrow, graceful as the curve of a hawk's wing, but no expression showed on his face. And at that moment, every faery in the room stopped what it was doing and turned to stare at me.

"Great," muttered Grimalkin, forgotten beside me. "Now they all know we are here. Well, come on, human. Let us play nicies with the court."

My legs felt weak, my mouth dry, but I forced myself to walk. Fey lords and ladies parted for me, but whether out of respect or disdain, I couldn't tell. Their eyes, cold and amused, gave nothing away. A green faery hound sniffed me and growled as I passed, but other than that, the place was silent.

What was I doing here? I didn't even know. Grimalkin was supposed to be leading me to Puck, but now Oberon wanted to see me. It seemed I was getting further and further from my goal of rescuing Ethan. Unless, of course, Oberon knew where Ethan was.

Unless Oberon was holding him hostage.

I reached the foot of the throne. Heart pounding, not knowing what else to do, I dropped to one knee and bowed. I felt the Erlking's eyes on the back of my neck, as ancient as the forest surrounding us. Finally, he spoke.

"Rise, Meghan Chase."

His voice was soft, yet the lilting undertone made me think of roaring oceans and savage storms. The ground trembled beneath my fingers. Controlling my fear, I stood and looked at him and saw something flicker across his masklike face. Pride? Amusement? It was gone before I could tell.

"You have trespassed in our lands," he told me, sending a murmur down the faery court. "You were never meant to see the Nevernever, and yet you tricked a member of this court into bringing you across the barrier. Why?"

Not knowing what else to do, I told him the truth. "I'm searching for my brother, sir. Ethan Chase."

“And you have reason to believe he is here?”

“I don’t know.” I cast a desperate look at Grimalkin, who was grooming a back leg and paying no attention to me. “My friend Robbie… Puck…he told me that Ethan was kidnapped by faeries. That they left a changeling in his place.”

“I see.” Oberon turned his head slightly, regarding the caged bird on his throne. “And that is yet another transgression, Robin.”

I gaped, my mouth dropping open. “Puck?”

The raven looked at me with bright green eyes, cawed softly, and seemed to shrug. I glared back at Oberon. “What are you doing to him?”

“He was commanded never to bring you to our land.” Oberon’s voice was calm but pitiless. “He was ordered to keep you blind to our ways, our life, our very existence. I punished him for his disobedience. Perhaps I will turn him back in a few centuries, after he has had time to think on his transgressions.”

“He was trying to help me!”

Oberon smiled, but it was cold, empty. “We immortals do not think of life in the same way as humans. Puck should have had no interest in rescuing a human child, especially if it conflicted with my direct orders. That he caved to your demands suggests he may be spending too much time with mortals, learning their ways and their capricious emotions. It is time he remembers how to be fey.”

I swallowed. “But what about Ethan?”

“I know not.” Oberon leaned back, shrugging his lean shoulders. “He is not here, within my territories. That much I can tell you.”

Despair crushed me like a ten-ton weight. Oberon didn’t know where Ethan was, and worse, didn’t care. Now I’d lost Puck as a guide, as well. It was back to square one. I’d have to find the other court—the Unseelie one—sneak in and rescue my brother, all by myself. That is, if I could get there in one piece. Maybe Grimalkin would agree to help me. I looked down at the cat, who was completely absorbed in washing his tail, and my heart sank. Probably not. Well, then. I was on my own.

The enormity of my task loomed ahead, and I fought back tears. Where would I go now? How would I even survive?

“Fine.” I didn’t mean to sound surly, but I wasn’t feeling very positive at the moment. “I’ll be leaving now. If you won’t help me, I’ll just have to keep looking.”

“I’m afraid,” said Oberon, “that I can’t let you go just yet.”

“What?” I recoiled. “Why?”

“Much of the land knows you are here,” the Erlking continued. “Outside this court, I have many enemies. Now that you are here, now that you are *aware*, they would use you to get to me. I’m afraid I cannot allow that.”

“I don’t get it.” I looked around at the fey nobles; many of them looked grim, unfriendly. The stares they leveled at me now glittered with dislike. I turned back to Oberon, pleading. “Why would they want me? I’m just a human. I don’t have anything to do with you people. I just want my brother back.”

“On the contrary.” Oberon sighed, and for the first time, age seemed to weigh him down. He looked old; still deadly and extremely powerful, but ancient and tired. “You are more connected to our world than you know, Meghan Chase. You see, you are my daughter.”

CHAPTER TEN

The Erlking's Daughter

I stared at Oberon as the world fell away beneath me. The Erlking gazed back, his expression cool and unruffled, his eyes blank once more. The silence around us was absolute. I didn't see anyone except Oberon; the rest of the court faded into the background, until we were the only two in the whole world.

Puck gave an indignant *caw* and flapped his wings against the cage.

That broke the spell. *"What?"* I choked out. The Erlking didn't so much as blink, which somehow infuriated me even more. "That's not true! Mom was married to my dad. She stayed with him until he disappeared, and she remarried Luke."

"That is true," Oberon nodded. "But that man is not your father, Meghan. I am." He stood, his courtly robes billowing around him. "You are half-fey, half my blood. Why do you think I had Puck guard you, keep you from seeing our world? Because it comes naturally to you. Most mortals are blind, but you could see through the Mist from the beginning."

I thought back to all those times I almost saw something, out of the corner of my eye, or silhouetted in the trees. Glimpses of things not quite there. I shook my head. "No, I don't believe you. My mom loved my dad. She wouldn't—" I broke off, not wanting to think about the implications.

"Your mother was a beautiful woman," Oberon continued softly. "And quite extraordinary, for a mortal. Artistic people can always see a bit of the fey world around them. She would often go to the park to paint and draw. It was there, beside the pond, that we first met."

"Stop it," I gritted out. "You're lying. I'm not one of you. I can't be."

"Only half," Oberon said, and from the corner of my eye I caught looks of disgust and contempt from the rest of the court. "Still, that is enough for my enemies to attempt to control me through you. Or, perhaps, to turn you against me. You are more dangerous than you know, daughter. Because of the threat you represent, you must remain here."

My world seemed to be collapsing around me. “For how long?” I whispered, thinking of Mom, Luke, school, everything I left behind in my world. Had I been missed already? Would I return to find a hundred years had passed while I was gone, and everyone I knew was long dead?

“Until I deem otherwise,” Oberon said, in the tone my mother often used when she settled the matter. *Because I said so.* “At the very least, until Elysium is through. The Winter Court will be arriving in a few days, and I will have you where I can see you.” He clapped, and a female satyr broke away from the crowd to bow before him. “Take my daughter to her room,” he ordered, sitting back on his throne. “See that she is made comfortable.”

“Yes, my lord,” murmured the satyr, and began to clop away, glancing back to see if I was coming. Oberon leaned back, not looking at me, his face blank and stony.

My audience with the Erlking was over.

I had stumbled back, prepared to follow the goat-girl out of the court, when Grimalkin’s voice floated up from the ground. I’d completely forgotten about the cat. “Begging your pardon, my lord,” Grimalkin said, sitting up and curling his tail around himself, “but our business is not yet complete. You see, the girl is in my debt. She promised me a favor for bringing her safely here, and that obligation has yet to be paid.”

I glared at the feline, wondering why it was bringing that up now. Oberon, however, looked at me with a grim expression. “Is this true?”

I nodded, wondering why the nobles were giving me looks of horror and pity. “Grim helped me escape the goblins,” I explained. “He saved my life. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for…” My voice trailed off as I saw the look in Oberon’s eyes.

“A life debt, then.” He sighed. “Very well, Cait Sith. What would you have of me?”

Grimalkin lowered his eyelids. It was easy to see that the cat was purring. “A small favor, great lord,” he rumbled, “to be called in at a later time.”

“Granted.” The Erlking nodded, and yet he seemed to grow bigger in his chair. His shadow loomed over the cat, who blinked and flattened his ears. Thunder growled overhead, the light in the forest dimmed, and a cold wind rattled the branches in the trees, showering us with petals. The rest of the court shrank away; some vanished from sight completely. In the

sudden darkness, Oberon's eyes glowed amber. "But be warned, feline," he boomed, his voice making the ground quiver. "I am not to be trifled with. Do not think to make a fool out of me, for I can grant your request in insurmountably unpleasant ways."

"Of course, great Erlking," Grimalkin soothed, his fur whipping about in the gale. "I am always your servant."

"I would be foolish indeed to trust the flattering words of a cait sith." Oberon leaned back, his face an expressionless mask once more. The wind died down, the sun returned, and things were normal again. "You have your favor. Now go."

Grimalkin bowed his head, turned, and trotted back to me, bottlebrush tail held high.

"What was that about, Grim?" I demanded, scowling at the feline. "I thought you wanted a favor from me. What was all that with Oberon?"

Grimalkin didn't so much as pause. Tail up, he passed me without comment, slipped into the tunnel of trees, and vanished from sight.

The satyr touched my arm. "This way," she murmured, and led me away from the court. I felt the eyes of the nobles and the hounds on my back as we left the presence of the Erlking.

"I don't understand," I said miserably, following the satyr girl across the clearing. My brain had gone numb; I felt awash in a sea of confusion, moments away from drowning. I just wanted to find my brother. How had it come to this?

The satyr gave me a sympathetic glance. She was shorter than me by a foot, with large hazel eyes that matched her curly hair. I tried to keep my eyes away from her furry lower half, but it was difficult, especially when she smelled faintly like a petting zoo.

"It is not so bad," she said, leading me not through the tunnel, but to a far side of the clearing. The trees here were so thick the sunlight didn't permeate the branches, shadowing everything in emerald darkness. "You might enjoy it here. Your father does you a great honor."

"He's not my father," I snapped. She blinked wide, liquid brown eyes, and her lower lip quivered. I sighed, regretting my harsh tone. "Sorry. It's just a lot to take in. Two days ago, I was home, sleeping in my own bed. I didn't believe in goblins or elves or talking cats, and I certainly didn't ask for any of this."

“King Oberon took a great chance for you,” the satyr said, her voice a bit firmer. “The cait sith held a life debt over you, which meant it could’ve asked for anything. My lord Oberon took it and made it his, so Grimalkin can’t request you to poison anyone or to give up your first child.”

I recoiled in horror. “He would have?”

“Who knows what goes on in the mind of a cat?” The satyr shrugged, picking her way over a tangle of roots. “Just…be careful what you say around here. If you make a promise, you’re bound to it, and wars have been fought over ‘small favors.’ Be especially careful around the high lords and ladies—they are all adept at the game of politics and pawn-making.” She suddenly paled and put a hand to her mouth. “I’ve said too much. Please forgive me. If that gets back to King Oberon…”

“I won’t say anything,” I promised.

She looked relieved. “I am grateful, Meghan Chase. Others might have used that against me. I am still learning the ways of the court.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tansy.”

“Well, you’re the only one who has treated me nicely without expecting anything in return,” I told her. “Thank you.”

She looked embarrassed. “Truly, you do not need to put yourself in my debt, Meghan Chase. Here, let me show you your room.”

We were standing at the edge of the trees. A wall of flowering bramble, so thick I couldn’t see to the other side, loomed above us. Between the pink-and-purple flowers, thorns bristled menacingly.

Tansy reached out and brushed one of the petals. The hedge shuddered, then curled in and rearranged itself, forming a tunnel not unlike the one leading into the court. At the end of the prickly tube stood a small red door.

In a daze, I followed Tansy into the briar tunnel and through the door as she opened it for me. Inside, a dazzling bedroom greeted my senses. The floor was white marble, inlaid with patterns of flowers, birds, and animals. Under my disbelieving stare, some of them moved. A fountain bubbled in the middle of the room, and a small table stood nearby, covered with cakes, tea, and bottles of wine. A massive, silk-covered bed dominated one wall, while a fireplace stood at the other. The flames crackling in the hearth changed color, from green to blue to pink and back again.

“This is the guest-of-honor suite,” Tansy announced, gazing around enviously. “Only important guests of the Seelie Court are allowed here. Your father really is giving you a great honor.”

“Tansy, please stop calling him that.” I sighed, looking around the massive room. “My dad was an insurance salesman from Brooklyn. I’d know if I wasn’t fully human, wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t there be some sort of sign, pointed ears or wings or something like that?”

Tansy blinked, and the look she gave me sent chills up my back. Hooves clopping, she crossed the room to stand beside a large dresser with a mirror overhead. Looking back, she beckoned me with a finger.

Anxiously, I moved to stand beside her. Somewhere deep inside, a voice began screaming that I didn’t want to see what would be revealed next. I didn’t listen in time. With a solemn look, Tansy pointed to the mirror, and for the second time that day, my world turned upside down.

I hadn’t seen myself since the day I stepped through the closet with Puck. I knew my clothes were filthy, sweat-stained, and ripped to shreds by branches, thorns, and claws. From the neck down, I looked how I expected to look: like a bum that had been tramping through the wilderness for two days without a bath.

I didn’t recognize my face.

I mean, I knew it was me. The reflection moved its lips when I did, and blinked when I blinked. But my skin was paler, the bones of my face sharper, and my eyes seemed enormous, those of a deer caught in headlights. And through my matted, tangled hair, where nothing had been yesterday, two long pointed ears jutted up from both sides of my head.

I gaped at the reflection, feeling dizzy, unable to comprehend the meaning. *No!* my brain screamed, violently rejecting the image before it, *that isn’t you! It isn’t!*

The floor swayed under my feet. I couldn’t catch my breath. And then, all the shock, adrenaline, fear, and horror of the past two days descended on me at once. The world spun, tilted on its axis, and I fell away into oblivion.

PART II

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Titania's Promise

"Meghan," Mom called from the other side of the door. "Get up. You're going to be late for school."

I groaned and peeked out from under the covers. Was it morning already? Apparently so. A hazy gray light filtered in my bedroom window, shining on my alarm clock, which read 6:48 a.m.

"Meghan!" Mom called, and this time a sharp rapping accompanied her voice. "Are you up?"

"Ye-es!" I hollered from the bed, wishing she'd go away.

"Well, hurry up! You're going to miss the bus."

I shambled to my feet, threw on clothes from the cleanest pile on the floor, and grabbed my backpack. My iPod tumbled out, landing with a splat on my bed. I frowned. Why was it wet?

"Meghan!" came Mom's voice yet again, and I rolled my eyes. "It's almost seven! If I have to drive you to school because you missed the bus, you're grounded for a month!"

"All right, all right! I'm coming, dammit!" Stomping to the door, I threw it open.

Ethan stood there, his face blue and wrinkled, his lips pulled into a rictus grin. In one hand, he clutched a butcher knife. Blood spattered his hands and face.

"Mommy slipped," he whispered, and plunged the knife into my leg.

* * *

I WOKE UP SCREAMING.

Green flames sputtered in the hearth, casting the room in an eerie glow. Panting, I lay back against cool silk pillows, the nightmare ebbing away into reality.

I was in the Seelie king's court, as much a prisoner here as poor Puck, trapped in his cage. Ethan, the real Ethan, was still out there somewhere, waiting to be rescued. I wondered if he was all right, if he was as terrified as I was. I wondered if Mom and Luke were okay with that demon changeling in the house. I prayed Mom's injury wasn't serious, and that the changeling wouldn't cause harm to anyone else.

And then, lying in a strange bed in the faery kingdom, another thought came to me. A thought sparked by something Oberon said. *That man is not your father, Meghan. I am.*

Is your father, not *was.* As if Oberon knew where he was. As if he was still alive. The thought made my heart pound in excitement. I knew it. My dad must be in Faeryland, somewhere. Maybe somewhere close. If only I could reach him.

First things first, though. I had to get out of here.

I sat up…and met the impassive green eyes of the Erlking.

He stood by the hearth, the shifting light of the flames washing over his face, making him even more eerie and spectral. His long shadow crept over the room, the horned crown branching over the bedcovers like grasping fingers. In the darkness, his eyes glowed green like a cat's. Seeing I was awake, he nodded and beckoned to me with an elegant, long-fingered hand.

"Come." His voice, though soft, was steely with authority. "Approach me. Let us talk, my daughter."

I'm not your daughter, I wanted to say, but the words stuck in my throat. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the mirror atop the dresser, and my long-eared reflection within. I shuddered and turned away.

Throwing off the bedcovers, I saw that my clothes had changed. Instead of the ripped, disgusting shirt and pants I'd worn for the past two days, I was clean and draped in a lacy white nightgown. Not only that, but there was an outfit laid out for me at the foot of the bed: a ridiculously fancy gown encrusted with emeralds and sapphires, as well as a cloak and long, elbow-length gloves. I wrinkled my nose at the whole ensemble.

"Where are my clothes?" I asked, turning to Oberon. "My real ones."

The Erlking sniffed. "I dislike mortal clothes within my court," he stated quietly. "I believe you should wear something suited for your heritage, as you are to stay here awhile. I had your mortal rags burned."

"You *what?*"

Oberon narrowed his eyes, and I realized I might've gone too far. I figured the King of the Seelie Court wasn't used to being questioned. "Um…sorry," I murmured, sliding out of bed. I'd worry about clothes later. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

The Erlking sighed and studied me uncomfortably. "You put me in a difficult position, daughter," he murmured at last, turning back to the hearth. "You are the only one of my offspring to venture into our world. I must say, I was a bit surprised that you managed to survive this long, even with Robin looking after you."

"Offspring?" I blinked. "You mean, I have other brothers and sisters? Half siblings?"

"None that are alive." Oberon made a dismissive gesture. "And none within this century, I assure you. Your mother was the only human to catch my eye in nearly two hundred years."

My mouth was suddenly dry. I stared at Oberon in growing anger. "Why?" I demanded, making him arch a slender eyebrow. "Why her? Wasn't she already married to my dad? Did you even care about that?"

"I did not." Oberon's look was pitiless, unrepentant. "What do I care for human rituals? I need no permission to take what I want. Besides, had she been truly happy, I would not have been able to sway her."

Bastard. I bit my tongue to keep the angry word from coming out. Furious as I might be, I wasn't suicidal. But Oberon's gaze sharpened, as if he knew what I was thinking. He gave me a long, level stare, challenging me to defy him. We glared at each other for several heartbeats, the shadows curling around us, as I struggled to keep my gaze steady. It was no use; staring at Oberon was like facing down an approaching tornado. I shivered and dropped my eyes first.

After a moment, Oberon's face softened, and a faint smile curled his lips. "You are a lot like her, daughter," he continued, his voice split between pride and resignation. "Your mother was a remarkable mortal. If she had been fey, her paintings would have come to life, so much care was put into them. When I watched her at the park, I sensed her longing, her loneliness and isolation. She wanted more from her life than what she was getting. She wanted something extraordinary to happen."

I didn't want to hear this. I didn't want anything ruining my perfect memory of our life before. I wanted to keep believing that my mom loved my dad, that we were happy and content, and she was his whole life. I

didn’t want to hear about a mother who was lonely, who fell prey to faery tricks and glamour. With one casual statement, my past had shattered into an unfamiliar mess, and I felt I didn’t know my mother at all.

“I waited a month before I made myself known to her,” Oberon went on, oblivious to my torment. I slumped against the bed as he continued. “I grew to know her habits, her emotions, every inch of her. And when I did reveal myself, I showed her only a glimpse of my true nature, curious to see if she would approach the extraordinary, or if she would cling to her mortal disbelief. She accepted me eagerly, with unrestrained joy, as if she had been waiting for me all along.”

“Stop,” I choked. My stomach churned; I closed my eyes to avoid being sick. “I don’t want to hear this. Where was my dad when all this was happening?”

“Your *mother’s husband* was away most nights,” Oberon replied, putting emphasis on those two words, to remind me that man was not my father. “Perhaps that was why your mother yearned for something more. I gave her that; one night of magic, of the passion she was missing. Just one, before I returned to Arcadia, and the memory of us faded from her mind.”

“She doesn’t remember you?” I looked up at him. “Is that why she never told me?”

Oberon nodded. “Mortals tend to forget their encounters with our kind,” he said softly. “At best, it seems like a vivid dream. Most times, we fade from memory completely. Surely you’ve noticed this. How even the people you live with, who see you every day, cannot seem to remember you. Though, I always suspected your mother knew more, remembered more, than she let on. Especially after you were born.” A dark tone crept into his voice; his slanted eyes turned black and pupilless. I trembled as the shadow crept over the floor, reaching for me with pointed fingers. “She tried to take you away,” he said in a terrible voice. “She wanted to hide you from us. From me.” Oberon paused, looking utterly inhuman, though he hadn’t moved. The fire leaped in the hearth, dancing madly in the eyes of the Erlking.

“And yet, here you are.” Oberon blinked, his tone softening, and the fire flickered low again. “Standing before me, your human mien faded at last. The moment you set foot in the Nevernever, it was only a matter of time before your heritage began to show itself. But now I must be very cautious.” He drew himself up, gathering his robes around him, as if to

leave. “I cannot be too wary, Meghan Chase,” he warned. “There are many who would use you against me, some within this very court. Be careful, daughter. Even I cannot protect you from everything.”

I sagged on the bed, my thoughts spinning crazily. Oberon watched me a moment longer, his mouth set in a grim line, then crossed the room without looking back. When I looked up, the Erlking was gone. I hadn’t even heard the door close.

* * *

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR STARTLED me upright. I didn’t know how much time had passed since Oberon’s visit. I still lay on the bed. The colored flames burned low, flickering erratically in the hearth. Everything seemed surreal and foggy and dreamlike, as if I’d imagined the whole encounter.

The knock came again, and I roused myself. “Come in!”

The door creaked open, and Tansy entered, smiling. “Good evening, Meghan Chase. How do you feel today?”

I slipped to the floor, realizing I was still in the nightgown. “Fine, I guess,” I muttered, looking around the room. “Where are my clothes?”

“King Oberon has given you a gown.” Tansy smiled and pointed to the gown on the bed. “He had it designed especially for you.”

I scowled. “No. No way. I want my real clothes.”

The little satyr blinked. She clopped over and picked up the hem of the dress, running it between her fingers. “But…my lord Oberon wishes you to wear this.” She seemed bewildered that I would defy Oberon’s wishes. “Does this not please you?”

“Tansy, I am *not* wearing that.”

“Why not?”

I recoiled at the thought of parading around in that circus tent. My whole life, I had worn ratty jeans and T-shirts. My family was poor and couldn’t afford designer clothes and name brands. Rather then bemoan the fact that I never got nice things, I flaunted my grunginess and sneered at the shallow rich girls who spent hours in the bathroom perfecting their makeup. The only dress I’d ever worn was to someone’s wedding.

Besides, if I wore the fancy outfit Oberon picked for me, it would be like admitting to being his daughter. And I wasn’t about to do that.

“I—I just don’t want to,” I stammered lamely. “I’d rather wear my own clothes.”

“Your clothing was burned.”

“Where’s my backpack?” I suddenly remembered the change of clothes I’d shoved inside. They’d be damp, moldy, and disgusting, but better that than wearing faery finery.

I found my backpack, stuffed carelessly behind the dresser, and unzipped it. A sour, dank smell rose from within as I dumped the contents onto the floor. The wadded ball of clothes rolled out, wrinkled and smelly, but mine. The broken iPod also tumbled free, skidded across the marble floor, and came to a stop a few feet from Tansy.

The satyr girl yelped, and in one fantastic bound, leaped onto the bed. Clutching the bedpost, she stared wide-eyed at the device on the floor.

“What is *that?*”

“What? This? It’s an iPod.” Blinking, I retrieved the device and held it up. “It’s a machine that plays music, but it’s broken now, so I can’t show you how it works. Sorry.”

“It stinks of iron!”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I opted for a confused frown.

Tansy stared at me with huge brown eyes, very slowly coming down from her perch. “You…you can hold it?” she whispered. “Without burning your flesh? Without poisoning your blood?”

“Um.” I glanced at the iPod, lying harmlessly in my palm. “Yes?”

She shuddered. “Please, put it away.” I shrugged, grabbed my backpack, and stuffed it into a side pocket. Tansy sighed and relaxed. “Forgive me, I did not wish to upset you. King Oberon has bid me keep you company until Elysium. Would you care to see more of the court?”

Not really, but it was better than being cooped up in here with nothing to do. *And maybe I’ll find a way out of this place.*

“All right,” I told the satyr girl. “But I want to change first.”

She cast a glance at my mortal clothes, lying wrinkled on the floor, and her nostrils flared. I could tell she wanted to say something but was polite enough not to comment on it. “As you wish. I will wait outside.”

* * *

I SLIPPED INTO THE BAGGY JEANS and the wrinkled, smelly T-shirt, feeling a nasty glow of satisfaction as they slid comfortably over my skin. *Burn my things, will he?* I thought, dragging my sneakers out and shoving my feet into them. *I'm not part of his court, and I'm certainly not claiming to be his daughter. No matter what he says.*

There was a brush lying on the dresser, and I grabbed it to run through my hair. As I looked in the mirror, my stomach twisted. I seemed less recognizable than before, in ways that I couldn't even put a finger on. I knew only that the longer I stayed here, the more I was fading away.

Shivering, I grabbed my backpack, happy for the familiar, comfortable weight, and slung it over my shoulders. Even though it carried nothing but a broken iPod, it was still mine. Refusing to glance at the mirror, feeling eyes on the back of my neck, I opened the door and slipped into the briar tunnel.

Moonlight filtered through the branches, dappling the path with silver shadows. I wondered how long I'd been asleep. The night was warm, and faint strings of music drifted on the breeze. Tansy approached, and in the darkness, her face looked less human and more staring-black-goat. A strand of moonlight fell over her, and she was normal again. Smiling, she took my hand and led me forward.

The bramble tunnel seemed longer this time, filled with twists and turns I didn't remember. I looked back once and saw the thorns closing behind us, the tunnel vanishing from sight.

"Um…"

"It's all right," said Tansy, pulling me forward. "The Hedge can take you wherever you want to go within the court. You just have to know the right paths."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

The tunnel opened into a moonlit grove. Music drifted on the breeze, played by a willowy green girl on an elegant golden harp. A small group of elven girls clustered around a tall, vine-backed chair with white roses growing out of the arms.

Sitting at the foot of the chair was a human. I blinked, rubbing my eyes to make sure they weren't playing tricks on me. No, it was a human, a young man with curly blond hair, his eyes blank and bemused. He was shirtless, and a golden collar encircled his neck, attached to a thin silver

chain. The group of fey girls swarmed around him, kissing his bare shoulders, rubbing their hands over his chest, whispering things in his ear. One of them ran a pink tongue up his neck, her fingernails drawing bloody gouges down his back, making him arch with ecstasy. My stomach turned and I looked away. A moment later, I forgot all about them.

On the throne was a woman of such otherworldly beauty, I was instantly mortified by my ratty clothes and casual appearance. Her long hair shifted colors in the moonlight, sometimes silver, sometimes brightest gold. Arrogance warred with the aura of power surrounding her. As Tansy pulled me forward and bowed, the woman narrowed glittering blue eyes and regarded me as though examining a slug found beneath a log.

"So," she said at last, her voice dripping poisoned icicles, "this is Oberon's little bastard."

Oh, crap. I knew who this was. She sat the second, empty throne in Oberon's court. She was the other driving force in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* She was nearly as powerful as Oberon himself.

"Queen Titania," I gulped, bowing.

"It speaks," the lady went on, feigning surprise, "as if it knows me. As if being Oberon's throwback will protect it from my wrath." Her eyes glittered like chips of diamond, and she smiled, making her even more beautiful and terrifying. "But I am feeling merciful tonight. Perhaps I will not cut out its tongue and feed it to the hounds. Perhaps." Titania looked past me to Tansy, still bowed low, and crooked one elegant finger. "Come forward, goat-child."

Keeping her head bowed, Tansy edged forward until she stood at the faery queen's arm. Queen Titania leaned forward, as though whispering to the satyr, but spoke loud enough for me to hear. "I will allow you to be the voice for this conversation," she explained, as if to a small child. "I will direct all questions to you, and you will speak for the bastard over there. If, at any point, it attempts to speak to me directly, I will turn it into a hart and set my hounds after it until it collapses from exhaustion or is torn apart. Is this perfectly clear?"

"Yes, my lady," Tansy whispered.

Perfectly clear, bitch-queen, I echoed in my thoughts.

"Excellent." Titania leaned back, looking pleased. She shot me a brittle smile, as hostile as a snarling dog, then turned to Tansy. "Now, goat-girl,

why is the bastard here?"

"Why are you here?" Tansy repeated, directing the question to me.

"I'm looking for my brother," I replied, being careful to keep my gaze on Tansy and not the vindictive ice-hag next to her.

"She's looking for her brother," Tansy confirmed, turning again to the faery queen. Good God, this was going to take forever.

"He was stolen and brought into the Nevernever," I said, plunging on before Titania could ask another question. "Puck led me here through the closet. I came to get my brother and take him home, and be rid of the changeling left in his place. That's all I want. I'll leave as soon as I find him."

"Puck?" mused the lady. "Aah, that is where he has been all this time. How very clever of Oberon, hiding you like that. And then you have to ruin his little deception by coming here." She *tsked* and shook her head. "Goat-girl," she said, looking at Tansy once more, "ask the bastard this—would she prefer being a rabbit or a hart?"

"M-my lady?" Tansy stammered as I felt the shadows closing in on me. My heart pounded and I looked around for an escape route. Thorny briars surrounded us; there was nowhere to run.

"It is a simple question," Titania went on, her tone perfectly conversational. "What would she prefer I change her into—a rabbit or a hart?"

Looking like a trapped rabbit herself, Tansy turned and met my eyes. "M-my lady would like to know if you—"

"Yes, I heard," I interrupted. "A rabbit or a hart. How about neither?" I dared look up and meet the faery queen's eyes. "Look, I know you hate me, but just let me rescue my brother and go home. He's only four, and he must be terrified. Please, I know he's waiting for me. Once I find him, we'll leave and you'll never see us again, I swear."

Titania's face glowed with angry triumph. "The creature dares to speak to me! Very well. She has chosen her fate." The faery queen raised a gloved hand, and lightning flashed overhead. "A hart it is, then. Set free the hounds. We will have a merry hunt!"

Her hand swept down, pointing at me, and spasms rocked my body. I screamed and arched my back, feeling my spine lengthen and pop. Invisible pliers grabbed my face and pulled, stretching my lips into a muzzle. I felt my legs getting longer, thinner, my fingers turning into

cloven hooves. I screamed again, but what left my throat was the agonized bleat of a deer.

Then, suddenly, it stopped. My body snapped into the proper shape, like a taut rubber band, and I collapsed, gasping, to the forest floor.

Through my blurry vision, I saw Oberon standing at the mouth of the tunnel, a pair of faery knights behind him, his arm outstretched. For a moment, I was sure I saw Grimalkin standing by his feet, but I blinked and the shadows were empty. With his appearance, the lilting harp music ground to a halt. The fey girls surrounding the collared human flung themselves to the floor and bowed their heads.

"Wife," Oberon said calmly, stepping into the clearing. "You will not do this."

Titania rose, her face a mask of fury. "You dare speak to me that way," she spat, and wind rattled the branches of the trees. "You dare, after you hid her from me, after you sent your little pet to protect her!" Titania sneered, and lightning crackled overhead. "You deny me a consort, and yet you flaunt your half-breed abomination in the court for all to see. You are a disgrace. The court mocks you in secret, and you still protect her."

"Nonetheless." Somehow, Oberon's composed voice rose above the howling of the wind. "She is my blood, and you will not touch her. If you have any grievances, my lady, cast them on me, not on the girl. It is not her fault."

"Perhaps I shall turn her into a cabbage," the queen mused, shooting me a look of black hatred, "and plant her in my garden for the rabbits to enjoy. Then she would be useful and wanted."

"You will *not* touch her," Oberon said again, his voice rising in authority. His cloak billowed out, and he grew taller, his shadow lengthening on the ground. "I command it, wife. I have given my word that she shall not come to harm within my court, and you will follow me on this. Do I make myself clear?"

Lightning sizzled, and the ground shook under the intensity of the rulers' gazes. The girls at the foot of the throne cringed, and Oberon's guards grasped the hilts of their swords. A branch snapped nearby, barely missing the harp girl, who cowered under the trunk. I pressed myself to the earth and tried to make myself as small as possible.

"Very well, husband." Titania's voice was as cold as ice, but the wind gradually died and the earth stopped moving. "As you command. I will not

harm the half-breed while she is within the court."

Oberon gave a curt nod. "And your servants will not do her ill, either."

The queen pursed her lips as if she'd swallowed a lemon. "No, husband."

The Erlking sighed. "Very well. We will speak on this later. I bid you good-night, my lady." He turned, his cloak billowing behind him, and left the clearing, the guards trailing in his wake. I wanted to call after him, but I didn't want it to look like I was running after Daddy's protection, especially after he put the smackdown on Titania.

Speaking of which…

I swallowed and turned to face the faery queen, who glared at me as if hoping the blood would boil in my veins. "Well, you heard His Majesty, half-breed," she cooed, her voice laced with poison. "Get out of my sight before I forget my promise and change you into a snail."

I was only too happy to leave. However, no sooner did I stand up and prepare to flee than Titania snapped her fingers.

"Wait!" she ordered. "I've a better idea. Goat-girl, come here."

Tansy appeared at her side. The satyr looked terrified; her eyes were bulging out of her head and her furry legs trembled. The queen flicked a finger at me. "Take Oberon's bastard to the kitchens. Tell Sarah we've found her a new serving girl. If the bastard must stay, she might as well work."

"B-but, my lady," Tansy stammered, and I marveled that she had the courage to contradict the queen, "King Oberon said—"

"Ah, but King Oberon is no longer here, is he?" Titania's eyes gleamed, and she smiled. "And what Oberon does not know will not hurt him. Now, go, before I truly lose my patience."

We went, trying not to trip over each other as we fled the queen's presence and went back into the tunnel.

As we reached the edge of the brambles, a ripple of power shook the air, and the girls behind us gave cries of dismay. A moment later, a fox darted into the tunnel with a flash of red fur. It stopped a few yards away and looked at us, amber eyes wide with confusion and fear. I saw the gleam of a golden collar around its throat, before it gave a frightened bark and vanished into the thorns.

In silence, I followed Tansy through the twisting maze of briars, trying to process all that had happened. Okay, so Titania had a serious grudge

against me; that was really, really bad. As the record of “Enemies-I-did-not-want” went, the Queen of the Faeries would probably top the list. I would have to be really careful from now on, or risk ending up a mushroom in somebody’s soup.

Tansy didn’t say a word until we came to a pair of large stone doors in the hedge. Tendrils of steam curled out beneath the cracks, and the air was hot and greasy.

Pushing the doors open released a blast of hot, smoky air. Blinking tears from my eyes, I stared into an enormous kitchen. Brick ovens roared, copper kettles bubbled over fires, and a dozen aromas flooded my senses. Furry little men in aprons scuttled back and forth between several long counters, cooking, baking, testing the contents of the kettles. A bloody boar carcass lay on a table, and hacking into it was a huge, green-skinned woman with thick tusks and brown hair pulled into a braid.

She saw us in the doorway and came stomping over, blood and bits of meat clinging to her apron.

“No loafers in my kitchen,” she growled, waving a large bronze butcher knife at me. “I got no scraps for the likes of you. Take your sneaky, thieving fingers elsewhere.”

“S-Sarah Skinflayer, this is Meghan Chase.” As Tansy introduced us, I gave the troll woman a sickly, please-don’t-kill-me smile. “She’s to help you in the kitchen by order of the queen.”

“I don’t need help from a skinny half-human whelp,” Sarah Skinflayer growled, eyeing me disdainfully. “She’d only slow us down, and we’re running ourselves into the ground, getting ready for Elysium.” Looking me over, she sighed and scratched her head with the blunt end of the knife. “I guess I could find a place for her. But tell Her Majesty that if she wants to torture someone else, try the stables or the kennel runs. I’ve got all the help I need here.”

Tansy nodded and left quickly, leaving me alone with the giantess. I felt sweat dripping down my back, and it wasn’t from the fires. “All right, whelp,” Sarah Skinflayer barked, pointing at me with her knife. “I don’t care if you are His Majesty’s throwback, you’re in my kitchen now. Rules here are simple—you don’t work, you don’t eat. And I have a little fun with the horsewhip in the corner. They don’t call me Sarah Skinflayer for nothing.”

The rest of the night passed in a blur of scrubbing and cleaning. I mopped blood and bits of flesh from the stone floor. I swept ashes from the brick ovens. I washed mountains of plates, goblets, pots, and pans. Every time I paused to rub my aching limbs, the troll woman would be there, barking orders and pushing me to my next chore. Toward the end of the night, after catching me sitting on a stool, she growled something about "lazy humans," snatched the broom from my hands, and gave me the one she was carrying. As soon as my hands closed around the handle, the broom leaped to life and began sweeping vigorously, brisk, hard strokes, while my feet carried me around the room. I tried letting go of the thing, but my fingers seemed glued to the handle, and I couldn't open my hands. I swept the floor until my legs ached and my arms burned, until I couldn't see for the sweat in my eyes. Finally, the troll woman snapped her fingers and the broom stopped its mad sweeping. I collapsed, my knees buckling underneath me, tempted to hurl the sadistic broom into the nearest oven.

"Did you enjoy that, half-breed?" Sarah Skinflayer asked, and I was too winded to answer. "There will be more of the same tomorrow, I guarantee it. Here." Two pieces of bread and a lump of cheese hit the ground. "That's the dinner you earned tonight. It should be safe for you to eat. Maybe tomorrow you'll get something better."

"Fine," I muttered, ready to crawl back to my room, thinking there was no way I was ever coming back here. I planned to conveniently "forget" about my forced servitude tomorrow, maybe even find a way out of the Seelie Court. "See you tomorrow."

The troll blocked my path. "Where do you think you're going, half-breed? You're part of my workforce now, so that means you're *mine*." She pointed to a wooden door in the corner. "The servants' quarters are full. You can take the pantry closet there." She smiled at me, fierce and terrible, showing blunt yellow teeth and tusks. "We start work at dawn. See you tomorrow, whelp."

* * *

I ATE MY MEASLY DINNER and crawled beneath shelves of onions, turnips, and strange blue vegetables to sleep. I had no blanket, but the kitchens were uncomfortably warm. I was trying to turn a sack of grain into a pillow, when I remembered my backpack, tossed onto a shelf, and crawled

out to retrieve it. There was nothing in the orange pack now but a broken iPod, but still, it was mine, the only reminder of my old life.

I snatched the backpack off the shelf and was walking back toward my tiny room when I felt something wriggle inside the pack. Startled, I nearly dropped it, and heard a soft snicker coming from inside. Edging over to the counter, I put the bag down, grabbed a knife, and unzipped it, ready to plunge the blade into whatever jumped out.

My iPod lay there, dead and silent. With a sigh, I zipped the pack up and carried it into the pantry with me. Tossing it into a corner, I curled up on the floor, put my head on the bag of grain, and let my thoughts drift. I thought of Ethan, and Mom, and school. Was anyone missing me back home? Were there search parties being sent out for me, police and dogs sniffing around the last places I was seen? Or had Mom forgotten me, as I was sure Luke had? Would I even have a home to go back to, if I did manage to find Ethan?

I started to shake, and my eyes grew misty. Soon, tears flowed down my cheeks, staining the sack under my head and making my hair sticky. I turned my face into the rough fabric and sobbed. I'd hit rock bottom. Lying in a dark pantry, with no hope of rescuing Ethan and nothing to look forward to but fear, pain, and exhaustion, I was ready to give up.

Gradually, as my sobs stilled and my breathing grew calmer, I realized I was not alone.

Raising my head, I first saw my backpack, where I'd flung it in the corner. It was unzipped, lying open like a gaping maw. I saw the glint of the iPod inside.

Then, I saw the eyes.

My heart stopped, and I sat up quickly, banging my head against the shelf. Dust showered me as I scooted to the far corner, gasping. I'd seen those eyes before, glowing green and intelligent. The creature was small, smaller than the goblins, with oily black skin and long, spindly arms. Except for the large, goblinlike ears, it looked like a horrible cross between a monkey and a spider.

The creature smiled, and its teeth lit the corner with pale blue light.

Then it spoke.

Its voice echoed flatly in the gloom, like a radio speaker hissing static. I couldn't understand it at first. Then, as if it were changing the station, the static cleared away and I heard words.

"—are waiting," it crackled, its voice still buzzing with static. "Come to…iron…your brother…held in…"

"Ethan?" I bolted upright, banging my head again. "Where is he? What do you know about him?"

"…Iron Court…we…waiting for…" The creature flickered in the darkness, going fuzzy like a weak signal. It hissed and blipped out of sight, plunging the room into blackness again.

I lay there in the gloom, my heart pounding, thinking about what the creature had said. I couldn't glean much from the eerie conversation, except that my brother was alive, and something called the Iron Court was waiting for something.

All right, I told myself, taking a deep breath. *They're still out there, Meghan. Ethan and your dad. You can't give up now. Time to stop being a crybaby and get your act together.*

I snatched the iPod and stuffed it into my back pocket. If that monster-thing came to me with any more news of Ethan, I wanted to be ready. Lying back on the cold floor, I closed my eyes and started to plan.

* * *

THE NEXT TWO DAYS PASSED in a blur. I did everything the troll woman told me to do: washed dishes, scrubbed floors, sliced meat off animal carcasses until my hands were stained red. No more spells were cast on me, and Sarah Skinflayer began to eye me with grudging respect. The food they offered was simple fare: bread and cheese and water. The troll woman informed me anything more exotic might wreak havoc with my delicate half-human system. At night, I would crawl, exhausted, into my bed in the pantry and fall asleep immediately. The spindly creature visited me no more after that first night, and my sleep was blissfully free of nightmares.

All the while, I kept my eyes and ears open, gleaning information that would help me when I finally made my escape. In the kitchen, under the hawk eye of Sarah Skinflayer, escape was impossible. The troll woman had a habit of appearing whenever I thought about taking a break, or striding into a room just as I finished a task. I did try to sneak out of the kitchen one night, but when I pulled open the front door, a small storage room greeted me instead of the tunnel of thorns. I almost despaired at that

point, but forced myself to be patient. The time would come, I told myself; I would just have to be ready when it did.

I spoke with the other kitchen workers when I could, creatures called brownies and house gnomes, but they were so busy I gained little information from them. I did discover something that made my heart pound excitedly. Elysium, the event that had everyone in the kitchen running around like mad things, would be held in a few days. As tradition dictated, the Seelie and Unseelie courts would meet on neutral ground, to discuss politics, sign new accords, and maintain their very uneasy truce. Since it was spring, the Unseelie Court would be traveling to Oberon's territory for Elysium; in winter, the Unseelie would play host. Everyone in the court was invited, and as kitchen staff, we were required to be there.

I continued working hard, my own plans for Elysium running around in my head.

Then, three days after my sentence to the kitchens, we had visitors.

I was standing over a basket of tiny dead quail, plucking them after Sarah Skinflayer broke their necks and passed them to me. I tried to ignore the troll as she reached into a cage, grabbed a flapping, bright-eyed bird, and twisted its neck with a faint popping sound. She then tossed the lifeless body into the basket like a plucked fruit and reached for another.

The doors swung open abruptly, streaming light into the room, and three faery knights walked in. Long silver hair, pulled into simple ponytails, glimmered in the dimness of the room, and their faces were haughty and arrogant.

"We have come for the half-breed," one of them announced, his voice ringing through the kitchen. "By order of King Oberon, she will come with us."

Sarah Skinflayer glanced my way, snorted, and picked up another quail. "That's fine with me. The brat's been nothing but deadweight since she came here. Take her out of my kitchens, and good riddance to her." She punctured the statement with the sharp crack of the bird's neck, and a brownie left the oven to take my place, shooing me away as it hopped onto a stool.

I started to follow them, but remembered my backpack, lying on the floor of the pantry closet. Muttering an apology, I hurried to grab it, slinging it over my back as I returned. None of the brownies looked up at me as I left, though Sarah Skinflayer glowered as she wrung a bird's neck.

Battling relief and an odd sense of guilt, I followed the knights out of the room.

They led me through the twisting brambles to yet another door, opening it without preamble. I walked into a small bedroom, not nearly as fancy as my first, but nice enough. I glimpsed a round, steaming pool through a side-room door, and thought longingly of a bath.

I heard muffled clops on the carpeted floor, and turned to see a pair of satyr girls enter behind a tall, willowy woman with pure white skin and straight raven hair. She wore a dress so black it sucked in the light, and her fingers were long and spiderlike.

One of the satyr girls peeked at me from behind the woman's dress. I recognized Tansy, who gave me a timid smile, as if she feared I was mad about the encounter with Titania. I wasn't; she had been a pawn in the faery queen's game, just like me. But before I could say anything, the tall woman swept up and grabbed me, holding my chin in her bony fingers. Black eyes, with no iris or pupil, scanned my face.

"Filthy," she rasped, her voice like silk over a steel blade. "What a plain, dirty little specimen. What does Oberon expect me to do with this? I'm not a miracle worker."

I wrenched my face from her grasp, and the satyr girls squeaked. The lady, however, seemed amused. "Well, I suppose we shall have to try. Half-breed—"

"My name is not 'half-breed,'" I snapped, tired of hearing the word. "It's Meghan. Meghan Chase."

The woman didn't blink. "You give out your full name so easily, child," she stated, making me frown in confusion. "You are lucky that it is not your True Name, else you might find yourself in a dire situation. Very well, Meghan Chase. I am Lady Weaver, and you will listen to me carefully. King Oberon has asked me to make you presentable for Elysium tonight. He will not have his half-breed daughter parading around in peasant rags, or worse, mortal clothes, in front of the Unseelie Court. I told him I would do my best and not to expect miracles, but we shall try. Now—" she gestured to the side room "—first things first. You reek of human, troll, and blood. Go take a bath." She clapped once, and the two satyrs trotted around to face me. "Tansy and Clarissa will attend you. Now I must design something for you to wear that will not make a laughingstock of your father."

I glanced at Tansy, who wasn't meeting my eyes. Silently, I followed them to the pool, stripped off my disgusting clothes, and sank into the hot water.

Bliss. I floated for several minutes, letting the heat soak into my bones, easing the aches and pains from the past three days. I wondered if faeries ever got dirty or sweaty; I'd never seen any of the nobles look anything less than elegant.

The heat was making me sleepy. I must've dozed, for I had disturbing dreams of spiders crawling over my body in great black swarms, covering me with webs as if I were a giant fly. When I awoke, shuddering and itchy, I was lying on the bed and Lady Weaver stood over me.

"Well." She sighed as I struggled to my feet. "It's not my greatest work, but I suppose it will have to do. Come here, girl. Stand before the mirror a moment."

I did as she asked, and gaped at the reflection it showed me. A shimmering silver dress covered me, the material lighter than silk. It rippled like water with the slightest movement, lacy sleeves billowing out from my arms, barely touching my skin. My hair had been elegantly curled and twisted into a graceful swirl atop my head, held in place by sparkling pins. A sapphire the size of a baby's fist flashed blue fire at my throat.

"Well?" Lady Weaver gently touched one of my sleeves, admiring it like an artist would a favorite painting. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," I managed to say, staring at the elven princess in the glass. "I don't even recognize myself." An image flashed through my head and I giggled with slight hysteria. "I won't turn into a pumpkin when midnight comes, will I?"

"If you annoy the wrong people, you might." Lady Weaver turned away, clapping her hands. Like clockwork, Tansy and Clarissa appeared wearing simple white dresses, their curly hair brushed out. I caught a glimpse of horns beneath Tansy's hazel bangs. She held my orange backpack in two fingers, as if afraid it would bite her.

"I had the girls wash your mortal clothes," Lady Weaver said, turning away from the mirror. "Oberon would have them destroyed, but then that would mean more work for me, so I put them in your bag. Once Elysium is over, I'll be taking that dress back, so you'll want to hang on to your own clothes."

“Um, okay,” I said, taking the backpack from Tansy. A quick inspection showed my jeans and shirt folded inside, and the iPod still hidden in a side pocket. For a moment, I thought to leave the pack behind, but decided against it. Oberon might find it offensive and have someone burn it without my knowledge. It was still mine, and held everything I owned in this world. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I swung it over one shoulder, the hillbilly princess with a bright orange pack.

“Let us go,” Lady Weaver rasped, wrapping a gauzy black shawl around her throat. “Elysium awaits. And, half-breed, I worked hard on that dress. Do try not to get yourself killed.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Elysium

We walked through the briar tunnels into the courtyard. As before, it was packed with fey, but the mood had changed into something dark. Music played, haunting and feral, and faeries danced, leaped, and cavorted in wild abandon. A satyr knelt behind an unresisting girl with red skin, running his hands up her ribs and kissing her neck. Two women with fox ears circled a dazed-looking brownie, their golden eyes bright with hunger. A group of fey nobles danced in hypnotic patterns, their movements erotic, sensual, lost in music and passion.

I felt the wild urge to join them, to throw back my head and spin into the music, not caring where it took me. I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the lilting strains lift my soul and make it soar toward the heavens. My throat tightened, and my body began to sway in tune with the music. I opened my eyes with a start. Without meaning to, I'd begun walking toward the circle of dancers.

I bit my lip hard, tasting blood, and the sharp pain brought me back to my senses. *Get it together, Meghan. You can't let down your guard. That means no eating, dancing, or talking to strangers. Focus on what you have to do.*

I saw Oberon and Titania sitting at a long table, surrounded by Seelie knights and trolls. The king and queen sat side by side, but were actively ignoring each other. Oberon's chin rested on his hands as he gazed out over his court; Titania sat like she had an icy pole shoved up her backside.

Puck was nowhere to be seen. I wondered if Oberon had freed him yet.

"Enjoying the festivities?" asked a familiar voice.

"Grimalkin!" I cried, spotting the gray cat perched on the edge of a raised pool, tail curled around his legs. His golden eyes regarded me with the same lazy disinterest. "What are you doing here?"

He yawned. "I was taking a nap, but it appears things might get interesting soon, so I think I will stick around." Rising, the cat stretched,

arching his back, and gave me a sideways look. “So, human, how is life in Oberon’s court?”

“You knew,” I accused him as he sat down and licked a paw. “You knew who I was all along. That’s why you agreed to take me to Puck—you were hoping to blackmail Oberon.”

“*Blackmail*,” said Grimalkin, blinking languid yellow eyes, “is a barbaric word. And you have much to learn about the fey, Meghan Chase. You think others would not have done the same? Everything here has a price. Ask Oberon. For that matter, ask your Puck.”

I wanted to ask what he meant, but at that moment, a shadow fell over my back and I turned to see Lady Weaver looming over me.

“The Winter Court will arrive soon,” she rasped, pencil-thin fingers closing on my shoulder. “You must take your place at the table, beside King Oberon. He has requested your presence. Go, go.”

Her grip tightened, and she steered me to the table where Oberon and the lords of the Summer Court waited. Oberon’s gaze was carefully neutral, but Titania’s glare of utter hatred made me want to run and hide. Between scary spider lady and the Queen of the Seelie Court, I was pretty sure I would end the night as a mouse or cockroach.

“Pay your respects to your father,” Lady Weaver hissed in my ear, before giving me a small push toward the Erlking. I swallowed and, under the stark gazes of the nobles, approached the table.

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do. I felt like I was giving a speech before the school auditorium and had forgotten my notes. Pleading silently for a clue, I met Oberon’s empty green eyes and dropped into a clumsy curtsy.

The Erlking shifted in his seat. I saw his eyes flicker to the bright orange backpack and narrow slightly. My cheeks flamed, but I couldn’t take it off now. “The Court welcomes Meghan Chase,” Oberon said in a stiff, formal voice. He paused, as if waiting for me to say something, but my voice caught in my throat. Silence stretched between us, and someone in the crowd snickered. Finally, Oberon gestured toward an empty chair near the end of the table, and I sat, red and blushing under the eyes of the entire court.

“That was impressive,” mused a voice near my feet. Grimalkin leaped into the chair beside me, just as I was about to put my backpack where he

stood. “You definitely inherited your father’s rapier wit. Lady Weaver must be so proud.”

“Shut up, Grim,” I muttered, and shoved the pack under my seat. I would’ve said more, but at that moment the music stopped and a loud trumpeting began.

“They’ve arrived,” Grimalkin stated, eyes narrowing to golden slits. The cat almost seemed to smile. “This should be very interesting.”

The trumpeting grew louder, and at one end of the court, the ever-present wall of thorns shifted, curled back, and formed a grand archway, much taller and more elegant than any I’d seen before. Black roses burst into bloom among the thorns, and an icy wind hissed through the gate, coating nearby trees with frost.

A creature padded through the arch, and I shuddered from more than the cold. It was a goblin, green and warty, dressed in a fancy black coat with gold buttons. It cast a sly look around the waiting court, puffed out its chest, and cried in a clear yet gravelly voice:

“Her Majesty, Queen Mab, Lady of the Winter Court, Sovereign of the Autumn Territories, and Queen of Air and Darkness!”

And the Unseelie came.

At first glance, they looked very similar to the Seelie fey. The little men carrying the Unseelie banner looked like gnomes in fancy cloaks and red caps. Then I noticed their jagged, sharklike grins and the bright madness in their eyes, and knew these were not friendly garden gnomes, not in any sense of the word.

“Redcaps,” Grimalkin mused, wrinkling his nose. “You will want to stay away from them, human. Last time they came, a not-to-bright phouka challenged one to a rigged shell game and won. It did not go well.”

“What happened?” I asked, wondering what a phouka was.

“They ate him.”

He pointed out the ogres next, great hulking beasts with thick, stupid faces and tusks slick with drool. Manacles bound their wrists, and silver chains were wrapped about their huge necks. They shambled into court like drugged gorillas, knuckles dragging on the ground, oblivious to the murderous glares they were receiving from the trolls.

More Unseelie spilled into the clearing. Thin, skulking bogeys like the one in Ethan’s closet, creeping along the ground like spindly spiders. Snarling, hissing goblins. A man with the head and chest of a shaggy black

goat, his horns sweeping into wicked points that caught the light. And more creatures, each one more nightmarish than the first. They leered when they caught sight of me, licking their lips and teeth. Thankfully, under the stern glares of Oberon and Titania, none of them approached the table.

Finally, as the court swelled to nearly twice its number, Queen Mab made her appearance.

The first hint I received was that the temperature in the clearing dropped about ten degrees. Goose bumps rose along my arms, and I shivered, wishing I had something heavier than a dress made of spider silk and gauze. I was about to move my chair a few feet down the table, out of the wind, when a cloud of snow burst from the mouth of the tunnel, and in walked the kind of woman that made ladies weep in envy and men launch wars.

She wasn't tall, like Oberon, or willowy-thin like Titania, but her presence drew every eye in the courtyard. Her hair was so black it appeared blue in places, and it spilled down her back like a waterfall of ink. Her eyes were of the void, of a night without stars, a sharp contrast to her marble skin and pale mulberry lips. She wore a dress that writhed around her like shadow incarnate. And, like Oberon and Titania, she radiated power.

The amount of fey in the courtyard, both Seelie and Unseelie, was making me very, very nervous. But just as I thought things couldn't get any eerier, Mab's entourage walked in.

The first two were tall and beautiful like the rest of their kind, all sharp angles and graceful limbs. They wore their black-and-silver suits with the easy confidence of nobles, raven hair pulled back to highlight their proud, cruel features. Like dark princes, they marched behind Mab with all the arrogance of the queen, thin hands resting on their swords, their capes flapping behind them.

The third noble, walking behind them, was also dressed in black and silver. Like the other two, he carried a sword, resting comfortably on his hip, and his face bore the fine lines of an aristocrat. But, unlike the others, he looked disinterested, almost bored, with the entire event. His eyes caught the moonlight and glittered like silver coins.

My heart turned to ice, and my stomach threatened to crawl up my throat. It was him, the boy from my dreams, the one who had chased Puck

and me through the forest. I glanced around wildly, wondering if I could hide before he saw me. Grimalkin gave me a bemused stare and twitched his tail.

"It's him!" I whispered, cutting my gaze to the nobles approaching behind the queen. "That boy! He was hunting me that day in the forest, when I landed in your tree. He tried to kill me!"

Grimalkin blinked. "That is Prince Ash, youngest son of Queen Mab. They say he is quite the hunter, and spends much of his time in the wyldwood, instead of at court with his brothers."

"I don't care who he is," I hissed, ducking down in my seat. "I can't let him see me. How do I get out of here?"

Grimalkin's snort sounded suspiciously like laughter. "I wouldn't worry about that, human. Ash would not risk Oberon's fury by attacking you in his own court. The rules of Elysium prevent violence of any kind. Besides—" the cat sniffed "—that hunt was days ago. It is likely he has forgotten all about you."

I scowled at Grimalkin and kept the fey boy in my sights as he bowed to Oberon and Titania, murmuring something I couldn't hear. Oberon nodded, and the prince stepped back, still bowing. When he straightened and turned around, his gaze swept over the table—

—to rest solely on me. His eyes narrowed, and he smiled, giving me a small nod. My heart sped up and I shivered.

Ash hadn't forgotten me, not by a long shot.

* * *

AS THE NIGHT WORE ON, I thought longingly of my days in the kitchens.

Not just because of Prince Ash, though that was the main reason I tried to avoid notice. The minions of the Unseelie Court made me jumpy and uncomfortable, and I wasn't the only one. Tension ran high among the ranks of Seelie and Unseelie; it was plain that these were ancient enemies. Only the fey's devotion to rules and proper etiquette—and the power of their sidhe masters—kept things from erupting into a bloodbath.

Or so Grimalkin told me. I took his word for it and remained very still in my seat, trying not to attract attention.

Oberon, Titania, and Mab stayed at the table all night. The three princes sat to Mab's left, with Ash farthest down the table, much to my

relief. Food was served, wine was poured, and the sidhe rulers spoke among themselves. Grimalkin yawned, bored with it all, and left my side, vanishing into the crowds. After what seemed like hours, the entertainment began.

Three brightly dressed boys with monkey tails swung onto the stage set before the table. They performed amazing leaps and tumbles over, onto, and through one another. A satyr played his pipes, and a human danced to the tune until her feet bled, her face a mixture of terror and ecstasy. A stunning woman with goat hooves and piranha teeth sang a ballad about a man who followed his lover beneath the waters of the lake, never to be seen again. At the end of the song, I gasped air into my burning lungs and sat up, unaware that I'd been unable to breathe.

Sometime during the course of the festivities, Ash disappeared.

Frowning, I scanned the courtyard for him, searching for a pale face and dark hair among the chaotic sea of fey. He wasn't in the courtyard, as far as I could see, and he wasn't at the table with Mab and Oberon….

There was a soft chuckle beside me, and my heart stopped.

"So this is Oberon's famous half-blood," Ash mused as I whirled around. His eyes, cold and inhuman, glimmered with amusement. Up close, he was even more beautiful, with high cheekbones and dark tousled hair falling into his eyes. My traitor hands itched, longing to run my fingers through those bangs. Horrified, I clenched them in my lap, trying to concentrate on what Ash was saying. "And to think," the prince continued, smiling, "I lost you that day in the forest and didn't even know what I was chasing."

I shrank back, eyeing Oberon and Queen Mab. They were deep in conversation and did not notice me. I didn't want to interrupt them simply because a prince of the Unseelie Court was talking to me.

Besides, I was a faery princess now. Even if I didn't quite believe it, Ash certainly did. I took a deep breath, raised my chin, and looked him straight in the eye.

"I warn you," I said, pleased that my voice didn't tremble, "that if you try anything, my father will remove your head and stick it to a plaque on his wall."

He shrugged one lean shoulder. "There are worse things." At my horrified look, he offered a faint, self-derogatory smile. "Don't worry,

princess, I won't break the rules of Elysium. I have no intention of facing Mab's wrath should I embarrass her. That's not why I'm here."

"Then what do you want?"

He bowed. "A dance."

"What!" I stared at him in disbelief. "You tried to kill me!"

"Technically, I was trying to kill Puck. You just happened to be there. But yes, if I'd had the shot, I would have taken it."

"Then why the hell would you think I'd dance with you?"

"That was then." He regarded me blandly. "This is now. And it's tradition in Elysium that a son and daughter of opposite territories dance with each other, to demonstrate the goodwill between the courts."

"Well, it's a stupid tradition." I crossed my arms and glared. "And you can forget it. I am not going anywhere with you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Would you insult my monarch, Queen Mab, by refusing? She would take it very personally, and blame Oberon for the offense. And Mab can hold a grudge for a very, very long time."

Oh, damn. I was stuck. If I said no, I would insult the faery queen of the Unseelie Court. I'd also be on the shit lists of both Mab *and* Titania, and between them, my chances of survival were easily and completely nil.

"So, you're saying you're not giving me a choice."

"There is always a choice." Ash held out his hand. "I will not force you. I only follow the orders of my queen. But know that the rest of the court is expecting us." He smiled then, bitter and self-mocking. "And I promise to be a perfect gentleman until the night is done. You have my word."

"Dammit." I hugged my arms, trying to think of something to get me out of this. "I'll just embarrass you, anyway," I told him defiantly. "I can't dance."

"You're Oberon's blood." A cool note of amusement colored his voice. "Of course you can dance."

I struggled with myself a moment longer. *This is the prince of the Unseelie Court,* I thought, my mind racing. *Maybe he'll know something about Ethan. Or your dad! The least you can do is ask.*

I took a deep breath. Ash waited patiently with his hand outstretched, and when I finally put my fingers into his palm, he offered a faint smile. His skin was cold as he smoothly moved my hand to his arm, and I

shivered at the nearness of him. He smelled sharply of frost and something alien—not unpleasant, but strange.

We left the table together, and my stomach twisted as I saw hundreds of glowing fey eyes watching us. Seelie and Unseelie alike parted for us, bowing, as we approached the open stage.

My knees trembled. “I can’t do this,” I whispered, clutching Ash’s arm for support. “Let me go. I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll be fine.” Ash didn’t look at me as we stepped onto the dance floor. He faced the trio of fey rulers with his head up and his expression blank. I looked over the sea of faces and shook in terror.

Ash tightened his grip on my hand. “Just follow my lead.”

He bowed to Oberon’s table, and I curtsied. The Erlking gave a solemn nod, and Ash turned to face me, taking one of my hands and guiding the other to his shoulder.

The music started.

Ash stepped forward, and I almost tripped, biting my lip as I tried to match his steps. We more or less minced around the stage, me concentrating on not falling or stepping on toes, Ash moving with tigerlike grace. Thankfully, no one booed or threw things, but I stumbled forward and back in a daze, only wanting the humiliation to end.

Somewhere in this waking nightmare, I heard a chuckle. “Stop thinking,” Ash muttered, pulling me into a spin that ended with me against his chest. “The audience doesn’t matter. The steps don’t matter. Just close your eyes and listen to the music.”

“Easy for you to say,” I growled, but he spun me again, so quickly that the stage whirled and I closed my eyes. *Remember why you’re doing this*, my mind hissed. *This is for Ethan.*

Right. I opened my eyes and faced the dark prince. “So,” I muttered, trying to sound conversational, “you’re Queen Mab’s son, right?”

“I think we’ve established that, yes.”

“Does she like to…collect things?” Ash looked at me strangely, and I hurried on. “Humans, I mean? Does she have a lot of humans in her court?”

“A few.” Ash spun me again, and this time I went with it. His eyes were bright as I came back to his arms. “Mab usually gets bored with mortals after a few years. She either releases them or turns them into something more interesting, depending on her mood. Why?”

My heart pounded. “Does she have a little boy in her court?” I asked as we swirled around the stage. “Four years old, curly brown hair, blue eyes? Quiet most of the time?”

Ash regarded me strangely. “I don’t know,” he said, to my disappointment. “I haven’t been to court lately. Even if I had, I cannot keep track of all the mortals the queen acquires and releases over the years.”

“Oh,” I muttered, lowering my eyes. Well, that idea was shot. “Well, if you’re not in court, where are you, then?”

Ash gave me a chilling smile. “The wyldwood,” he replied, spinning me away. “Hunting. I rarely let my prey escape, so be grateful Puck is such a coward.” Before I could answer, he pulled me close again, his mouth against my ear. “Although, I am happy I didn’t kill you then. I told you a daughter of Oberon could dance.”

I’d forgotten about the music, and realized my body was acting on autopilot, sweeping over the dance floor as if I’d done it a thousand times. For a long moment, we said nothing, lost in the music and the dance. My emotions soared as the crescendo rose into the night, and there was no one except us, spinning around and around.

The music ceased as Ash pulled me into a final spin. I ended up pressed against him, his face inches from mine, his gray eyes bright and intense. We stood there a moment, frozen in time, our hearts thrumming wildly between us. The rest of the world had disappeared. Ash blinked and offered a tiny smile. It would take only a half step to meet his lips.

A scream shattered the night, jerking us back to our senses. The prince released me and stepped away, his face shutting into that blank mask once more.

The scream came again, followed by a thunderous roar that rattled the tables and sent fine crystal goblets crashing to the floor. Over the crowd of spectators, I saw the bramble wall shaking wildly as something large tore its way through. Fey began shouting and pushing one another, and Oberon stood, his ringing voice calling for order. For just a moment, everyone froze.

The brambles parted with deafening snaps, and something huge clawed its way free. Blood streaked the tawny hide of a monster—not a shadowy, under-your-bed bogey that jumped out at you, but a real monster that would rip open your stomach and eat your entrails. It had three horrible

heads: a lion with a bloody satyr in its jaws, a goat with mad white eyes, and a hissing dragon with molten flame dripping from its teeth. A chimera.

For a heartbeat, it paused, staring at the party it had just interrupted, the heads blinking in unison. The dead satyr, now a chewed, mangled mess, dropped to the ground, and someone in the crowd screamed.

The chimera roared, three voices rising to a deafening shriek. The crowd scattered as the monster gathered its hindquarters under it and leaped into the fray. It came down beside a fleeing redcap and lashed out with a claw-tipped paw, catching the faery in the stomach and disemboweling it instantly. As the redcap staggered and fell, holding its intestines, the chimera turned and pounced on a troll, bearing it to the ground. The troll snarled and grabbed the lion's throat, holding it away, but then the dragon head came down, clamping its jaws around the troll's neck and twisting. Dark blood exploded in a fine spray, filling the air with a sickening coppery smell. The troll shuddered and went limp.

Gore dripping from its snout, the chimera looked up and saw me, still frozen on the stage. With a roar, it sprang, landing on the edge of the dance floor. My brain screamed at me to run, but I couldn't move. I could only stare in detached fascination as it crouched, muscles rippling under its bloody fur. Its hot breath washed over me, stinking of blood and rotten meat, and I saw a scrap of red clothing on the lion's tooth.

With a shriek, the chimera pounced, and I closed my eyes, hoping it'd be quick.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Escape from the Seelie Court

Something slammed into me, pushing me away. Pain shot up my arm as I landed on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes with a gasp.

Ash stood between me and the chimera, his sword unsheathed. The blade glowed an icy-blue, wreathed in frost and mist. The monster roared and swatted at him, but he leaped aside, slashing with his blade. The frozen edge bit into the chimera's paw, drawing a humanlike scream from the monster. It pounced, and Ash rolled away. On his feet again, he raised an arm, bluish light sparkling from his fingers. As the monster whirled on him, he flung his hand out, and the chimera shrieked as a flurry of glistening ice shards ripped into its hide.

"To arms!" Oberon's booming voice rose above the roars of the chimera. "Knights, hold the beast back! Protect the envoys! Quickly!"

Mab's voice joined the chaos, ordering her subjects to attack. Now more fey were arriving, leaping onto the stage with weapons and battle cries, fangs and teeth bared. Less warrior-type fey scurried off the stage, fleeing for their lives as the others attacked. Trolls and ogres slammed great spiked clubs onto the beast's hide, redcaps sliced at it with tarnished bronze knives, and Seelie knights brandishing swords of flame cut at its flanks. I saw Ash's brothers join the fray, their ice blades stabbing at the monster's back. The chimera roared again, badly wounded, momentarily cowed by its attackers.

Then the dragon's head came up, steam billowing from its jaws, and blasted a stream of liquid fire at the fey surrounding it. The molten spittle covered several of its attackers, who screamed and fell to the ground, thrashing wildly as the flesh melted from their bones. The monster tried to leave the dance floor, but the fey pressed closer, jabbing at it with their weapons, keeping it in place.

As the last of the civilian fey left the stage, the Seelie King stood, his face alien and terrifying, long silver hair whipping behind him. He raised

his hands, and a great rumbling shook the ground. Plates clattered and smashed to the ground, trees trembled, and the fey backed away from the snarling monster. The chimera growled and snapped at the air, its eyes wary and confused, as if it were unable to understand what was happening.

The stage—four feet of solid marble—splintered with a deafening crack, and huge roots unfurled through the surface. Thick and ancient, covered in gleaming thorns, they wrapped around the chimera like giant snakes, digging into its hide. The monster roared, raking the living wood with its claws, but the coils continued to tighten.

The fey swarmed the monster again, hacking and cutting. The chimera fought on, lashing out with deadly claws and fangs, catching those who ventured too close. An ogre smashed his club into the beast's side, but took a savage blow from the monster's paw that tore his shoulder open. A Seelie knight cut at the dragon's head, but the jaws opened and it blasted the faery with molten fire. Screaming, the knight wheeled back, and the dragon raised its head to glare at the Erlking standing at the table, his eyes half closed in concentration. Its lips curled, and it took a breath. I yelled at Oberon, but my voice was lost in the cacophony, and I knew my warning would come too late.

And then Ash was there, dodging the beast's claws, his sword streaking down in an icy blur. It sliced clean through the dragon's neck, severing it, and the head struck the marble with a revolting splat. Ash danced away as the neck continued to writhe, spraying blood and liquid fire from the stump. Fey howled in pain. As Ash retreated from the lava spray, a troll rammed his spear through the lion's open maw and out the back of its head, and a trio of redcaps managed to dodge the flailing claws to swarm the goat's head, biting and stabbing. The chimera jerked, thrashed, and finally slumped in the web of branches, twitching sporadically. Even as it died, the redcaps continued to rip out its flesh.

The battle was over, but the carnage remained. Charred, mangled, mutilated bodies lay like broken toys around the fractured stage. Gravely wounded fey clutched at their injuries, their faces twisted in agony. The smell of blood and burning flesh was overwhelming.

My stomach heaved. Twisting my head from the gruesome sight, I crawled to the edge of the stage and vomited into the rose bushes.

"Oberon!"

The shriek sent chills through me. Queen Mab was on her feet, eyes blazing, pointing a gloved finger at the Erlking.

"How dare you!" she rasped, and I shivered as the temperature dropped to freezing. Frost coated the branches and crept along the ground. "How dare you set this monster on us during Elysium, when we come to you under the banner of trust! You've broken the covenant, and I will not forgive this heresy!"

Oberon looked pained, but Queen Titania leaped to her feet. "You dare?" she cried, as lightning crackled overhead. "You dare accuse us of summoning this creature? This is obviously the work of the Unseelie Court to weaken us in our own home!"

Fey began to mutter among themselves, casting suspicious glances at those from another court, though seconds ago they'd fought side by side. A redcap, its mouth dripping black chimera blood, hopped down from the stage to leer at me, beady eyes bright with hunger.

"I smell a human," it cackled, running a purple tongue over its fangs. "I smell young girl blood, and sweeter flesh than a monster's." I hurried away, walking around the stage, but it followed. "Come to me, little girl," it crooned. "Monster flesh is bitter, not like sweet young humans. I just want a nibble. Maybe just a finger."

"Back off." Ash appeared out of nowhere, looking dangerous with dark blood speckling his face. "We're in enough trouble without you eating Oberon's daughter. Get out of here."

The redcap sneered and scurried off. The fey boy sighed and turned to me, his gaze scanning the length of my dress. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "You saved my life," I murmured. I was about to say "thank you," but caught myself, since those words seemed to indebt you in Faery. A thought came, unbidden and disturbing. "I…I'm not bound to you or anything like that, am I?" I asked fearfully. He raised an eyebrow, and I swallowed. "No life debt, or having to become your wife, right?"

"Not unless our sires made a deal without our knowledge." Ash glanced back at the arguing rulers. Oberon was trying to silence Titania, but she would have none of it, turning her anger on him as well as Mab. "And I'd say any contracts they made are officially broken now. This will probably mean war."

"War?" Something cold touched my cheek, and I glanced up to see snowflakes swirling in a lightning-riddled sky. It was eerily beautiful, and

I shivered. “What will happen then?”

Ash stepped closer. His fingers came up to brush the hair from my face, sending an electric shock through me from my spine to my toes. His cool breath tickled my ear as he leaned in.

“I’ll kill you,” he whispered, and walked away, joining his brothers at the table. He did not look back.

I touched the place where his fingers had brushed my skin, giddy and terrified at the same time.

“Careful, human.” Grimalkin appeared on the corner of the stage, overshadowed by the dead chimera. “Do not lose your heart to a faery prince. It never ends well.”

“Who asked you?” I glared at him. “And why do you always pop up when you’re not wanted? You got your payment. Why are you still following me?”

“You are amusing,” purred Grimalkin. Golden eyes flicked to the bickering rulers and back again. “And of great interest to the king and queens. That makes you a valuable pawn, indeed. I wonder what you will do next, now that your brother is not in Oberon’s territory?”

I looked at Ash, standing beside his brothers, stone-faced as the argument between Mab and Titania raged on. Oberon was trying to calm them both, but with little success.

“I have to go to the Unseelie Court,” I whispered as Grimalkin smiled. “I’ll have to look for Ethan in Queen Mab’s territory.”

“I would imagine so,” Grimalkin purred, slitting his eyes at me. “Only, you don’t know where the Unseelie Court is, do you? Mab’s entourage came here in flying carriages. How will you find it?”

“I could sneak into one of the carriages, maybe. Disguise myself.”

Grimalkin snorted with laughter. “If the redcaps do not smell you out, the ogres will. There would be nothing left but bones by the time you reached Tir Na Nog.” The cat yawned and licked a forepaw. “Too bad you lack a guide. Someone who knows the way.”

I stared at the cat, a slow anger building as I realized what it was saying. “You know the way to the Unseelie Court,” I said quietly.

Grimalkin scrubbed a paw over his ears. “Perhaps.”

“And you’ll take me there,” I continued, “for a small favor.”

“No,” Grimalkin said, looking up at me. “There is nothing small about going into Unseelie territory. My price will be steep, human, make no

mistake about that. So, you must ask yourself, how much is your brother worth to you?"

I fell silent, staring at the table, where the queens were still going at it.

"Why would I summon the beast?" Mab questioned with a sneer in Titania's direction. "I've lost loyal subjects, as well. Why would I set the creature against my own?"

Titania matched the other queen's disdain. "You don't care who you murder," she said with a sniff, "as long as you get what you want in the end. This is a clever ploy to weaken our court without casting suspicion on yourself."

Mab swelled in fury, and the snow turned to sleet. "Now you accuse me of murdering my own subjects! I will not listen to this a moment longer! Oberon!" She turned to the Erlking with her teeth bared. "Find the one who did this!" she hissed, her hair writhing around her like snakes. "Find them and give them to me, or face the wrath of the Unseelie Court."

"Lady Mab," Oberon said, holding up his hand, "do not be hasty. Surely you realize what this will mean for both of us."

Mab's face didn't change. "I will wait until Midsummer's Eve," she announced, her expression stony. "If the Seelie Court does not turn over those responsible for this atrocity to me, then you will prepare yourselves for war." She turned to her sons, who awaited her orders silently. "Send for our healers," she told them. "Gather our wounded and dead. We will return to Tir Na Nog tonight."

"If you are going to decide," Grimalkin said softly, "decide quickly. Once they leave, Oberon will not let you go. You are too valuable a pawn to lose to the Unseelie Court. He will keep you here against your will, under lock and key if he has to, to keep you out of Mab's clutches. After tonight, you may not get another chance to escape, and you will never find your brother."

I watched Ash and his brothers disappear into the crowd of dark fey, saw the grim, terrifying look on the Erlking's face, and made my decision.

I took a deep breath. "All right, then. Let's get out of here."

Grimalkin stood. "Good," he said. "We leave now. Before the chaos dies down and Oberon remembers you." He looked over my elegant gown and sniffed, wrinkling his nose. "I will fetch your clothes and belongings. Wait here, and try not to draw attention to yourself." He twitched his tail, slipped into the shadows, and vanished.

I stood by the dead chimera, looking around nervously and trying to keep out of Oberon's sight.

Something small dropped from the lion's mane, glimmering briefly as it caught the light, hitting the marble with a faint clink. Curious, I approached warily, keeping my eye on the huge carcass and the few redcaps still gnawing on it. The object on the ground winked metallically as I knelt and picked it up, turning it over in my palm.

It looked like a tiny metal bug, round and ticklike, about the size of my pinkie nail. Its spindly metal legs were curled up over its belly, the way insects' legs do when they die. It was covered in black ooze, which I realized with horror was chimera blood.

As I stared at it, the legs wiggled, and it flipped over in my hand. I yelped and hurled the bug to the ground, where it scuttled over the marble stage, squeezed into a crack, and vanished from sight.

* * *

I WAS WIPING THE CHIMERA blood from my hands, discovering it stained flesh, when Grimalkin appeared, materializing from nowhere with my bright orange backpack. "This way," the cat muttered, and led me from the courtyard into a cluster of trees. "Hurry and change," he ordered as we ducked beneath the shadowy limbs. "We don't have much time."

I unzipped the pack and dumped my clothes to the ground. I started to wriggle out of the dress, when I noticed Grimalkin still watching me, eyes glowing in the dark. "Could I get a little privacy?" I asked. The cat hissed.

"You have nothing I'd be interested in, human. Hurry up."

Scowling, I shed the gown and changed into my old, comfortable clothes. As I jammed my feet into my sneakers, I noticed Grimalkin staring back at the courtyard. A trio of Seelie knights wandered toward us across the lawn, and it appeared they were looking for someone.

Grimalkin flattened his ears. "You have already been missed. This way!"

I followed the cat through the shadows toward the hedge wall surrounding the courtyard. The brambles peeled back as we approached, revealing a narrow hole in the hedge, just big enough for me to squeeze into on my hands and knees. Grimalkin slipped through without looking

back. I grimaced, knelt down, and crawled in after the cat, dragging my backpack behind me.

The tunnel was dark and winding. I pricked myself a dozen times as I maneuvered my way through the twisting maze of thorns. Squeezing through a particularly narrow stretch, I cursed as the thorns kept snagging my hair, clothes, and skin. Grimalkin looked over his shoulder, blinking luminous glowing eyes as I struggled.

"Try not to bleed so much on the thorns," he said as I jabbed myself in the palm and hissed in pain. "Right now, anyone could follow us, and you are leaving a very easy trail."

"Right, 'cause I'm bleeding all over the place for shits and giggles." A bramble caught my hair, and I yanked it free with a painful tearing sound. "How much farther till we're out?"

"Not far. We are taking a shortcut."

"This is a shortcut? What, does it lead into Mab's garden or something?"

"Not really." Grimalkin sat down and scratched his ear. "This path actually leads us back to your world."

I jerked my head up, jabbing myself in the skull and bringing tears to my eyes. "What? Are you serious?" Relief and excitement flared; I could go home! I could see my mom; she must be worried sick about me. I could go to my own room and—

I stopped, the balloon of happiness deflating as suddenly as it had come. "No. I can't go home yet," I said, feeling my throat tighten. "Not without Ethan." I bit my lip, resolved, then glared at the cat. "I thought you were taking me to the Unseelie Court, Grim."

Grimalkin yawned, sounding bored with it all. "I am. The Unseelie Court sits much closer to your world than the Seelie territories. It is faster to enter the mortal lands and slip into Tir Na Nog from there."

"Oh." I thought about that for a moment. "Well, then, why did Puck take me through the wyldwood? If it's easier to reach the Unseelie Court from my world, why didn't he use that way?"

"Who knows? Trods—the paths into the Nevernever—are difficult to find. Some are constantly shifting. Most lead directly into the wyldwood. Only a very few will take you to the Seelie or Unseelie territories, and they have powerful guardians protecting them. The trod we are using now is a one-way trip. Once we are through, we will not be able to find it again."

“Isn’t there another way in?”

Grimalkin sighed. “There are other paths to Tir Na Nog from the wyldwood, but you would have to deal with the creatures that live there, as you found out with the goblins, and they are not the worst things you could meet. Also, Oberon’s guards will be hunting for you, and the wyldwood will be the first place they’ll look. The fastest way to the Unseelie Court is the way I am taking you now. So, decide, human. Do you still want to go?”

“Doesn’t look like I have a choice, does it?”

“You keep saying that,” Grimalkin observed, “but there is always a choice. And I suggest we stop talking and keep moving. We are being followed.”

We kept going, wending our way through the briar tunnel, picking through the thorns until I lost all sense of time and direction. At first, I tried avoiding the brambles scratching at me, but continued to be pricked and poked, until I finally gave in and stopped bothering about it. Strangely, once I did, I was scratched a lot less. Once I stopped moving like a snail, Grimalkin set a steady pace through the brambles, and I followed as best I could. Occasionally, I saw side tunnels spin off in other directions, and caught glimpses of shapes moving through the brush, though I never got a clear look.

We turned a corner, and suddenly found a large cement tube in our path. It was a drainage pipe; I could see open air and blue sky through the hole. Oddly, it was sunny on the other side.

“The mortal world is through here,” Grimalkin informed me. “Remember, once we are through, we will not be able to return to the Nevernever this way. We will have to find another trod to go back.”

“I know,” I said.

Grimalkin gave me a long, uncomfortable stare. “Also, remember, human—you have been to the Nevernever. The glamour over your eyes is gone. Though other mortals will not see anything strange about you, you will see things a little…differently. So, try not to overreact.”

“Differently? Like how?”

Grimalkin smiled. “You will see.”

* * *

WE EMERGED FROM THE DRAINAGE pipe to the sounds of car engines and street traffic, a shock after being in the wilderness for so long. We were in a downtown area, with buildings looming over us on either side. A sidewalk extended over the drainage pipe; beyond that, rush-hour traffic clogged the roads, and people shuffled down the walkway, absorbed in their own small worlds. No one seemed to notice a cat and a scruffy, slightly bloodied teenager crawl out of a drainage ditch.

"Okay." Despite my worry, I was thrilled to be back in my own familiar world, and astounded by the huge glass-and-metal buildings towering above me. The air here was cold, uncomfortably so, and dirty slush clogged the sidewalks and drains. Craning my neck, I gazed up at the looming skyscrapers, feeling slightly dizzy as they seemed to sway against the sky. There was nothing like this in my tiny Louisiana town. "Where are we?"

"Detroit." Grimalkin half closed his eyes, peering around the town and the people rushing by us. "One moment. It has been a while since I have been here. Let me think."

"Detroit, *Michigan?*"

"Hush."

As he was thinking, a large figure in a tattered red hoodie lurched out of the crowd and came toward us, clutching a bottle in a sack. He looked like a homeless person, though I'd never actually seen one. I wasn't *too* worried; we were on a well-traveled street, with a lot of witnesses to hear me scream should he try anything. He would probably ask me for change or a cigarette, and keep going.

However, as he got close, he raised his head, and I saw a wrinkled, bearded face with fangs jutting crookedly from its jaw. In the shadows of the hood, his eyes were yellow and slitted like a cat's. I jumped as the stranger leered and stepped closer. His stench nearly knocked me down; he smelled of roadkill and bad eggs and fish rotting in the sun. I gagged and nearly lost my breakfast.

"Pretty girl," the stranger growled, reaching out with a claw. "You came from *there*, didn't you? Send me back, now. Send me back!"

I backed away, but Grimalkin leaped between us, fluffed out to twice his size. His yowling screech jerked the man to a halt, and the bum's eyes widened in terror. With a gurgling cry, he turned and ran, knocking people

aside as he fled. People cursed and looked around, glaring at one another, but none seemed to notice the fleeing bum.

"What was that?" I asked Grimalkin.

"A norrgen." The cat sighed. "Disgusting things. Terrified of cats, if you can believe it. He was probably banished from the Nevernever at some point. That would explain his words to you, wanting you to send him back."

I looked for the norrgen, but it had vanished into the crowd. "Are all the fey walking around the human world outcasts?" I wondered.

"Of course not." Grimalkin's look was scornful, and no one does scornful better than a cat. "Many choose to be here, going back and forth between this world and the Nevernever at will, so long as they can find a trod. Some, like brownies or bogarts, haunt a house forever. Others blend in to human society, posing as mortals, feeding off dreams, emotions, and talent. Some have even been known to marry a particularly exceptional mortal, though their children are shunned by faery society, and the fey parent usually leaves if things get too tough.

"Of course, there are those who *have* been banished to the mortal world. They make their way as best they can, but spending too much time in the human world does strange things to them. Perhaps it is the amount of iron and technology that is so fatal to their existence. They start to lose themselves, a little at a time, until they are only shadows of their former selves, empty husks covered in glamour to make them look real. Eventually, they simply cease to exist."

I looked at Grimalkin in alarm. "Could that happen to you? To me?" I thought of my iPod, remembering the way Tansy leaped away from it in terror. I suddenly recalled the way Robbie was mysteriously absent from all of his computer classes. I'd simply thought he hated typing. I had no idea it was deadly to him.

Grimalkin seemed unconcerned. "If I stay here long enough, perhaps. Maybe in two or three decades, though I certainly do not plan to stay that long. As for you, you are half-human. Your mortal blood protects you from iron and the banal effects of your science and technology. I would not worry too much if I were you."

"What's wrong with science and technology?"

Grimalkin actually rolled his eyes. "If I thought this would turn into a history lesson, I would have picked a better classroom than a city street."

His tail lashed, and he sat down. “You will never find a faery at a science fair. Why? Because science is all about proving theories and understanding the universe. Science folds everything into neat, logical, well-explained packages. The fey are magical, capricious, illogical, and unexplainable. Science cannot prove the existence of faeries, so naturally, we do not exist. That type of nonbelief is fatal to faeries.”

“What about Robbie…er…Puck?” I asked, not knowing why he suddenly popped into my head. “How did he stay so close to me, going to school and everything, with all the iron around?”

Grimalkin yawned. “Robin Goodfellow is a very old faerie,” he said, and I squirmed to think of him like that. “Not only that, he has ballads, poems, and stories written about him, so he is very near immortal, as long as humans remember them. Not to say he is immune to iron and technology—far from it. Puck is strong, but even he cannot resist the effects.”

“It would kill him?”

“Slowly, over time.” Grimalkin stared at me with solemn eyes. “The Nevernever is dying, human. It grows smaller and smaller every decade. Too much progress, too much technology. Mortals are losing their faith in anything but science. Even the children of man are consumed by progress. They sneer at the old stories and are drawn to the newest gadgets, computers, or video games. They no longer believe in monsters or magic. As cities grow and technology takes over the world, belief and imagination fade away, and so do we.”

“What can we do to stop it?” I whispered.

“Nothing.” Grimalkin raised a hind leg and scratched an ear. “Maybe the Nevernever will hold out till the end of the world. Maybe it will disappear in a few centuries. Everything dies eventually, human. Now, if you are quite done with the questions, we should keep moving.”

“But if the Nevernever dies, won’t you disappear, as well?”

“I am a cat,” Grimalkin replied, as if that explained anything.

* * *

I FOLLOWED GRIMALKIN DOWN the sidewalk as the sun set over the horizon and the streetlamps flickered to life.

I caught glimpses of fey everywhere, walking past us, hanging out in dark alleys, stealing over the rooftops or skipping along the power lines. I wondered how I could've been so blind before. And I remembered a conversation with Robbie, in my living room so long ago, a lifetime ago. *Once you start seeing things, you won't be able to stop. You know what they say—ignorance is bliss, right?*

If only I'd listened to him then.

Grimalkin led me down several more streets and suddenly stopped. Across the street a two-story dance club, lit with pink-and-blue neon lights, radiated in the darkness. The sign proclaimed it Blue Chaos. Young men and women lined up outside the club, the lights sparkling off earrings, metal studs, and bleached hair. Music pounded the walls outside.

"Here we are," Grimalkin said, sounding pleased with himself. "The energy around a trod never changes, though when I was here last this place was different."

"The trod thingy is the dance club?"

"*Inside* the dance club," Grimalkin said with a great show of patience.

"I'll never get in there," I told the feline, looking at the club. "The line is, like, a mile long, and I don't think this is a minor-friendly place. I won't make it past the front door."

"I would think your Puck taught you better than this." Grimalkin sighed and slipped into a nearby alley. Confused, I followed, wondering if we were going in another way.

But Grimalkin leaped atop an overflowing Dumpster and faced me, his eyes floating yellow orbs in the dark. "Now," he began, lashing his tail, "listen closely, human. You are half fey. More important, you are Oberon's daughter, and it is high time you learned to access some of that power everyone is so worried about."

"I don't have any—"

"Of course you do." Grimalkin's eyes narrowed. "You stink of power, which is why fey react to you so strongly. You just do not know how to use it. Well, I shall teach you, because it will be easier than having to sneak you into the club myself. Are you ready?"

"I don't know."

"Good enough. First—" and Grimalkin's eyes disappeared "—close your eyes."

Feeling not a little apprehensive, I did so.

“Now, reach out and feel the glamour around you. We are very close to the dance club, so glamour is in ready supply from the emotions inside. Glamour is what fuels our power. It is how we change shape, sing someone to their death, and appear invisible to mortal eyes. Can you feel it?”

“I don’t—”

“Stop talking and just *feel*.”

I tried, though I didn’t know what I was supposed to experience, sensing nothing but my own discomfort and fear.

And then, like an explosion of light on the inside of my eyes, I *felt* it.

It was like color given emotion: orange passion, vermillion lust, crimson anger, blue sorrow, a swirling, hypnotic play of sensations in my mind. I gasped, and heard Grimalkin’s approving purr.

“Yes, that is glamour. The dreams and emotions of mortals. Now open your eyes. We are going to start with the simplest of faery glamour, the power to fade from human sight, to become invisible.”

Still groggy from the torrent of swirling emotions, I nodded. “All right, becoming invisible. Sounds easy.”

Grimalkin glared at me. “Your disbelief will cripple you if you think like that, human. Do not believe this impossible, or it *will* be.”

“All right, all right, I’m sorry.” I held up my hands. “So, how will I do this?”

“Picture the glamour in your mind.” The cat half slitted its eyes again. “Imagine it is a cloak that covers you completely. You can shape the glamour to resemble anything you wish, including an empty space in the air, a spot where no one is standing. As you drape the glamour over yourself, you must believe that no one can see you. Just, so.”

The eyes vanished, along with the rest of the cat. Even knowing Grimalkin was capable of it, it was still eerie seeing him fade from sight right before my eyes.

“Now.” The eyes opened again, and the cat’s body followed. “Your turn. When you believe you are invisible, we will go.”

“What? Don’t I get a practice run or something?”

“All it takes is belief, human. If you do not believe you are invisible on the first try, it only gets more difficult. Let us go. And remember, no doubts.”

“Right. No doubts.” I took a breath and closed my eyes, willing the glamour to come. I pictured myself fading from sight, swirling a cloak of

light and air around my shoulders and pulling up the hood. *No one can see me,* I thought, trying not to feel foolish. *I'm invisible now.*

I opened my eyes and looked down at my hands.

They were still there.

Grimalkin shook his head as I looked up in disappointment. "I will never understand humans," he muttered. "With everything you have seen, magic, fey, monsters, and miracles, you still could not believe you could become invisible." He sighed heavily, leaping off the Dumpster. "Very well. I suppose *I* will have to get us in."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blue Chaos

We stood in line for nearly an hour.

"All this could have been avoided if you just did what I told you," Grimalkin hissed for about the hundredth time. His claws dug into my arm, and I resisted the urge to drop-kick him over the fence like a football.

"Give me a break, Grim. I tried, okay? Just drop it already." I ignored the odd stares I was getting from the people around me, listening to the crazy girl muttering to herself. I didn't know what they saw when they looked at Grim, but it certainly wasn't a live, talking cat. And a heavy one at that.

"A simple invisibility spell. There is nothing easier. Kittens can do it before they walk."

I would've said something, but we were approaching the bouncer, who guarded the front doors to Blue Chaos. Dark, muscular, and massive, he checked the ID of the couple in front of us before waving them through. Grim pricked my arm with his claws, and I stepped up.

Cold black eyes raked me up and down. "I don't think so, honey," the bouncer said, flexing a muscle in his arm. "Why don't you turn around and leave? You have school tomorrow."

My mouth was dry, but Grim spoke up, his voice low and soothing. "You are not looking at me right," he purred, though the bouncer didn't glance at him at all. "I am actually much older than I look."

"Yeah?" He didn't seem convinced, but at least he wasn't throwing me out by the scruff of my neck. "Let's see some ID, then."

"Of course." Grim poked me, and I shifted his weight to one hand so I could hand my Blockbuster card to the bouncer. He snatched it, peering at it suspiciously, while my stomach roiled and cold sweat dripped down my neck. But Grimalkin continued to purr in my arms, completely undisturbed, and the bouncer handed the card back with a grudging look.

“Yeah, fine. Go on, then.” He waved a huge hand at me, and we were through.

Inside *was* chaos. I’d never been to a club before, and was momentarily stupefied by the lights and the noise. Dry-ice smoke writhed along the floor, reminding me of the mist that crept through the wyldwood. Colored lights turned the dance floor into an electric fantasyland of pink, blue, and gold. Music rattled my ears; I could feel the vibrations in my chest, and wondered how anyone could communicate in such a cacophony.

Dancers spun, twisted, and swayed on the stage, bouncing in time to the music, sweat and energy pouring off them as they danced. Some danced alone, some in pairs that could not keep their hands off each other, their energy turning to passion.

Among them, writhing and twisting in near frenzies, feeding off the outpouring of glamour, danced the fey.

I saw faeries in leather pants and outfits that sparkled, slinked, and were half-torn, far different from the medieval finery of the Summer Court. A girl with birdlike talons and feathers for hair fluttered through the crowd, slashing young skin and licking the blood. A stick-thin boy with triple-jointed arms wrapped them around a dancing couple, long fingers entwined in their hair. Two fox-eared girls danced together, a mortal between them, their bodies pressed against his. The human’s face was flung back in ecstasy, unaware of the hands running over his butt and between his legs.

Grimalkin squirmed and jumped out of my arms. He trotted toward the back of the club, his tail looking like a fuzzy periscope navigating the ocean of mist. I followed, trying not to stare at the unearthly dancers spinning among the mass of humanity.

Near the bar, a small door with the words Staff Only stood near the back of the club. I could see the shimmer of glamour around it, making the door difficult to look at; my gaze wanted to slide past. Casually, I approached the door, but before I got too close, the bartender rose up from behind the counter and narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t wanna do that, love,” he warned. His dark hair was pulled back in a tail, and horns curled up from his brow. He moved to the edge of the bar, and I heard hooves clopping over the wood. “Why don’t you come over here and I’ll fix you something nice? On the house, what’d you say?”

Grimalkin leaped onto a bar stool and put his front paws on the counter. A human on the stool next to him sipped his drink like nothing was happening. “We’re looking for Shard,” Grim said as the bartender shot him an irritated look, turning away from me.

“Shard is busy,” the satyr replied, but he didn’t meet Grim’s eyes as he said it, and a moment later he began wiping down the bar. Grim continued to stare at him, until the satyr looked up. His eyes slitted dangerously. “I said, she’s busy. Now, why don’t you beat it, before I get the redcaps to stuff you into a bottle?”

“David, that’s no way to treat customers,” a cool female voice breathed from behind me, and I jumped. “Especially if one is an old friend.”

The woman behind us was small and slight, with pale skin and neon-blue lips that curled sardonically at the edges. Her spiky hair stuck out at every angle, its dyed shades of blue, green, and white resembling ice crystals growing out of her scalp. She wore tight leather pants, a midriff tee that barely covered her breasts, and a dagger on one thigh. Her face glittered from countless piercings: eyebrows, nose, lips, and cheeks, all silver or gold. Her long ears sparkled with rings, studs, and bars, enough to make any metalhead weep from envy. A silver bar lanced through her belly button, and a tiny dragon pendant dangled from it.

“Hello, Grimalkin,” the woman said, sounding resigned. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? What brings you to my humble club? And with the Summer whelp in tow?” Her eyes, scintillating blue and green, looked me over curiously.

“We need passage into Tir Na Nog,” Grimalkin said without hesitation. “Tonight, if you can.”

“Don’t ask for much, do you?” Shard grinned, motioning us into a corner booth. Once seated, she leaned back and snapped her fingers. A human, lean and gangly, melted out of the shadows to stand beside her, his face slack with adoration.

“Appletini,” she told him. “Spill it, and spend the rest of your days as a roach. Do you two want anything?”

“No,” Grimalkin said firmly. I shook my head.

The human scurried off, and Shard leaned forward. Her blue lips curved in a smile.

“So. Passage to Winter’s territory. You want to use my trod, is that correct?”

“It is not your trod,” Grimalkin said, thumping his tail against the booth cushions.

“But it is under *my* dance club,” Shard replied. “And the Winter Queen won’t be pleased if I let the Summer whelp into her territory unannounced. Don’t look at me like that, Grim. I’m not stupid. I know the daughter of the Erlking when I see her. So, the question is, what do I get out of this?”

“A favor repaid.” Grimalkin narrowed his eyes at her. “Your debt to me canceled.”

“That’s fine for you,” Shard said, and turned her leer on me, “but what about this one? What can she offer?”

I swallowed. “What do you want?” I asked before Grimalkin could say anything. The cat shot me an exasperated glare, but I ignored him. If anyone would barter away my fate, it would be me. I didn’t want Grimalkin promising this woman my firstborn child without my consent.

Shard leaned back again, crossing her legs with a smile. The gangly boy appeared with her drink, a green concoction with a tiny umbrella, and she sipped it slowly, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Hmm, that’s a good question,” Shard murmured, swirling her ’tini thoughtfully. “What do I want of you? It must be awfully important for you to get into Mab’s territory. What would that be worth?”

She took another sip, appearing deep in thought. “How about…your name?” she offered at last. I blinked.

“My…my name?”

“That’s right.” Shard smiled disarmingly. “Nothing much. Just promise me the use of your name, your True Name, and we’ll call it even, yes?”

“The girl is young, Shard,” Grimalkin said, watching us both with slitted eyes. “She might not even know her true calling yet.”

“That’s all right.” Shard smiled at me. “Just give me the name you call yourself now, and we’ll make do, yes? I’m sure I can find *some* use for it.”

“No,” I told her. “No deal. You’re not getting my name.”

“Oh, well.” Shard shrugged and raised the glass to her lips. “I guess you’ll have to find another way into Mab’s territory, then.” She shifted toward the end of the booth. “It has been a pleasure. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a club to run.”

“Wait!” I blurted out.

Shard paused, watching me expectantly.

“All right,” I whispered. “All right, I’ll give you a name. After that, you’ll open the trod, right?”

The faery smiled, showing her teeth. “Of course.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Grimalkin asked softly. “Do you know what happens when you give a faery your name?”

I ignored him. “Swear it,” I told Shard. “Promise that you’ll open the trod once I give you the name. Say the words.”

The faery’s smile turned vicious. “Not as stupid as she first appears,” she muttered, and shrugged. “Very well. I, Shard, keeper of the Chaos trod, do swear to open the path once I have received payment in the form of a single name, spoken by the requesting party.” She broke off and smirked at me. “Good enough?”

I nodded.

“Fine.” Shard licked her lips, looking inhumanly eager, as her eyes gleamed. “Now, give me the name.”

“All right.” I took a deep breath as my stomach twisted wildly. “Fred Flintstone.”

Shard’s face went blank. “What?” For one glorious moment, she looked utterly bewildered. “That is not your name, half-blood. That’s not what we agreed on.”

My heart pounded. “Yes, it is,” I told her, keeping my voice firm. “I promised to give you *a* name, not *my* name. I’ve upheld my end of the contract. You have your name. Now, show us the trod.”

Beside me, Grimalkin started sneezing, a sudden explosion of feline laughter. Shard’s face remained blank a moment longer, then cold rage crept into her features and her eyes turned black. Her quills bristled, and ice coated the glass in her hand before it shattered into a million sparkling pieces.

“You.” Her gaze stabbed into me, cold and terrifying. I fought the urge to run screaming out of the club. “You will regret this insolence, half-breed. I will not forget this, and will make you beg for mercy until your throat is raw from it.”

My legs trembled, but I stood and faced her. “Not before you show us the trod.”

Grimalkin stopped laughing and jumped onto the table. “You have been out-negotiated, Shard,” he said, his voice still thick with amusement.

“Cut your losses and try again some other time. Right now, we need to be going.”

The faery’s eyes still glimmered black, but she made a visible effort to control herself. “Very well,” she said with great dignity. “I will uphold my end of the bargain. Wait here a moment. I need to inform David that I’ll be gone for a bit.”

She stalked away with her chin in the air, her spines quivering like icicles.

“Very clever,” Grimalkin said softly as the faery marched toward the bar. “Shard has always been too rash, never pausing to listen for important details. She thinks she is too smart for that. Still, it is never wise to anger a Winter sidhe. You might regret your little battle of wits before this is over. The fey never forget an insult.”

I remained silent, watching Shard lean over and whisper something to the satyr. David looked up at me, eyes narrowing, before jerking his head once and turning to wipe the counter.

Shard returned. Her eyes were normal again, though they still glared at me with cold dislike. “This way,” she announced frostily, and led us across the room, toward the Staff Only door on the far wall.

We followed her down five or six flights of stairs, pausing at another door with the words *Danger! Keep Out!* painted on the surface in bright red. Shard looked back at me with an evil little smile.

“Don’t mind Grumly. He’s our last deterrent against those who poke their noses where they don’t belong. Occasionally, some phouka or redcap will think themselves clever, and sneak past David to see what’s down here. Obviously, I can’t have that. So, I use Grumly to dissuade them.” She chuckled. “Sometimes, a mortal will find his way down here, as well. That’s the best entertainment. It cuts down on his food bill, too.”

She gave me a razor-sharp grin and pushed the door open.

The stench hit me like a giant hammer, a revolting mix of rot and sweat and excrement. I recoiled, and my stomach heaved. Bones littered the stone floor, some human, some decidedly not. A pile of dirty straw lay in one corner, next to a door on the far wall. I knew that was the entrance to the Unseelie territory, but reaching it would be a real challenge.

Chained to a ring in the floor, manacled by one tree-stump leg, was the biggest ogre I’d ever seen. His skin was bruise purple, and four yellow tusks curled from his lower jaw. His torso was massive, muscles and

tendons rippling under his mottled hide, and his thick fingers ended in curved black claws.

He also wore a heavy collar around his throat, the skin underneath red and raw, showing old scars where he'd clawed at it. A moment later, I realized both the collar and the manacles were made of iron. The ogre limped across the room, favoring the chained leg as he moved, his ankle festering with blisters and open sores. Grimalkin gave a small hiss.

"Interesting," he said. "Is the ogre really that strong, to be bound that way?"

"He's escaped a few times in the past, before we started using the iron," Shard replied, looking pleased with herself. "Smashed the club to bits, and ate a few patrons before we stopped him. I thought drastic measures were called for. Now he behaves himself."

"It is killing him." Grimalkin's voice was flat. "You must realize this will considerably shorten his life span."

"Don't lecture me, Grimalkin." Shard gave the cat a disgusted look and stepped through the door. "If I didn't keep him here, he'd only be rampaging somewhere else. The iron won't kill him right away. Ogres heal so fast."

She sauntered up to the ogre, who glared at her with pain-filled yellow eyes. "Move," she ordered it, pointing toward the pile of straw in the corner. "Go to your bed, Grumly. Now."

The ogre stared at her, snarled feebly, and shuffled to his bed, the chain clinking behind him. I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

Shard opened the door. A long hallway stretched beyond the door, and mist flowed through the opening into the room. "Well?" she called back to us. "Here's your trod to the Winter territory. Are you going to stand there or what?"

Keeping a wary eye on Grumly, I started forward.

"Wait," Grimalkin muttered.

"What's the matter?" I turned and found him scanning the room, eyes narrowed to slits. "Afraid of the ogre? Shard will keep him off us, right?"

"Not at all," the cat replied. "Her bargain is done. She just opened the path to Tir Na Nog for us. She never promised us protection."

I looked into the room again and found Grumly staring at us, drool dripping to the floor from his teeth. On the other side, Shard was smirking at me.

There was a sudden clatter on the stairs, the sound of many feet skipping down the steps. Over the railing, a wrinkled, evil face peered down at me, shark-teeth gleaming. A red bandanna fell off its head to land at my feet.

“Redcaps,” I gasped, stepping into the room without thinking.

Grumly roared, surging to the end of his chain, raking the ground with his claws. I yelped and flattened myself against the wall as the ogre snarled and slashed at the air, straining to reach me. His huge fists pounded the floor not ten feet away, and he bellowed in frustration. I couldn’t move. Grimalkin had disappeared. Shard’s laughter rang in the air as a dozen redcaps swarmed into the room.

“Now,” she said, leaning against the door frame, “this is entertainment.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Puck's Return

The redcaps crowded through the doorway, teeth flashing in the dim light. They wore biker jackets and leather pants, and sported crimson bandannas instead of their trademark caps. Snarling and gnashing their teeth, they spotted Grumly at the same time the ogre noticed them, and leaped back as a huge fist pounded the pavement.

Snarls and curses rose in the air. The redcaps danced madly out of the ogre's reach, brandishing bronze knives and wooden baseball bats. "What is this?" I heard one of them screech. "Goat-man promised us young flesh if we followed the stairs. Where's our meat?"

"There!" snarled another, pointing at me with what looked like a tarnished shiv. "In the corner. Don't let the monster get our meat!"

They slid toward me, hugging the wall as I had done, keeping out of the ogre's grasp. Grumly roared and slashed the ground, raking deep trenches into the cement floor, but the redcaps were small and quick, and he couldn't reach them. I watched in horror as the hideous fey swarmed toward me, laughing and waving their weapons, and I couldn't move. I was about to be eaten alive, but if I ventured any farther into the room, Grumly would tear me apart.

Through it all, I was aware of Shard, lounging in the other doorway, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. "Do you like where our contract has gone, little bitch?" she called over the bellows of Grumly and the clattering teeth of the redcaps. "Throw me your real name, and I might call them off."

One of the redcaps leaped at me, jaws gaping, springing right for my face. I threw up my arm, and the jagged teeth sank into my flesh, clamping down like a steel trap. Shrieking, I flailed wildly, dislodging the repulsive weight and flinging it at the ogre. The redcap hit the ground and leaped to his feet snarling, just as Grumly's fist smashed him into bloody paste.

Time seemed to slow down. I guess that happens when you're about to die. The redcaps surged forward, shark teeth grinning and clacking,

Grumly bellowed at the end of his chain, and Shard leaned against the door frame and laughed.

A huge black bird flapped through the open door.

The redcaps leaped.

The bird dove, sinking its talons into a redcap's face, shrieking and flapping its wings. Startled and confused, the redcaps hesitated as the bird thrashed about, beating its wings and stabbing at the faery's eyes with its beak. The pack hooted and slugged at it with their bats, but the bird darted up at the last second, and the redcap howled as the weapons slammed into him instead.

In the confusion, the bird exploded, changing shape in midair. A body dropped between me and the redcaps, shedding black feathers and giving me a familiar grin.

"Hi, princess. Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a bitch."

"Puck!"

He winked at me, then shot a glance at the Winter sidhe, standing in the doorway. "Hey, Shard." He waved. "Nice place you've got here. I'll have to remember it, so I can give it the special 'Puck touch.'"

"It's an honor to have you, Robin Goodfellow," Shard answered, grinning evilly. "If the redcaps leave your head intact, I'll mount it over the bar so everyone can see it when they come in. Kill him!"

Snarling, the redcaps leaped, teeth flashing like piranhas swarming a drowning bird. Puck pulled something out of his pocket and tossed it. It exploded into a thick log, and the redcaps clamped their jaws around the wood, teeth sinking into the bark. With muffled yelps, they clattered to the floor.

"Fetch," Puck called.

Shrieking with rage, the redcaps splintered the log, shredding it like buzz saws. Teeth chattering, they spit wood chips and glared at us murderously. Puck turned to me with an apologetic look. "Excuse me a moment, princess. I have to go play with the puppies."

He stepped toward them, grinning, and the redcaps lunged, brandishing knives and baseball bats. Puck waited until the last second before he dodged, *into* the room and away from the wall. The pack followed. I gasped as Grumly's fist hammered down, but Puck leaped aside just in time, and a redcap was smashed flatter than a pancake.

“Whoops,” Puck exclaimed, putting both hands to his mouth, even as he sidestepped Grumly’s second swing. “Clumsy of me.”

The redcaps snarled curses and lunged at him again.

They continued this deadly dance around the room, Puck leading the redcaps on with taunts, laughter, and cheers. Grumly roared and smashed his fists at the little men scurrying around his feet, but the redcaps were quick, and now wary to the danger. This didn’t stop them from launching an all-out attack on Puck, who danced, dodged, and pirouetted his way around the ogre, almost seeming to enjoy himself. My heart stayed lodged in my throat the whole time; one wrong move, one miscalculation, and Puck would be a bloody smear on the floor.

The air around me chilled. I’d been so focused on Puck, I didn’t realize Shard had slipped away from the door frame and was now a few feet away. Her eyes glimmered black, and her lips curled in a smile as she raised a hand. A long spear of ice formed overhead, angled at me.

There was a yowl, and an invisible weight must have thumped onto her back, for she staggered and nearly fell. Something flashed golden on her chest: a key, attached to a thin silver chain. With a curse, Shard flung the invisible assailant into the wall; there was a thud and a hiss of pain as Grimalkin materialized for a split second and winked out of sight again.

In that moment of distraction, I lunged, grabbing the key around her neck. She turned with blinding speed, and a pale white hand clamped around my throat. I gasped, clawing at her arm with my free hand, but it seemed to be made of stone. Her skin burned with cold; ice crystals formed on my neck as Shard slowly tightened her grip, smiling. I sank to my knees as the room began to dim.

With a fierce screech, Grimalkin landed on her back, sinking claws and teeth into her neck. Shard screamed, and the pressure on my throat disappeared. Lurching upright, I shoved the sidhe with all my might, pushing her away. There was a jerk and a tinny snap, and the key came loose in my hand.

Coughing, I staggered away from the wall, looking up at the ogre. “Grumly!” I yelled, my voice raw and hoarse. “Grumly, look at me! Listen to me!”

The ogre stopped pounding the floor and swung his tormented gaze to me. Behind me, a feline yowl cut through the air, and Grimalkin’s body tumbled to the floor.

“Help us!” I cried, holding up the key. It winked golden in the light. “Help us, Grumly, and we’ll free you! We’ll set you free!”

“Free…me?”

Something smashed into the back of my head, nearly knocking me out. I collapsed, clutching the key, as pain raged across my senses. Something kicked me in the ribs, flipping me to my back. Shard loomed overhead, her dagger in one raised hand.

“No!”

Grumly’s bellow filled the room. Startled, Shard looked up, just realizing she was within the ogre’s reach. Too late. Grumly’s backhand smashed into her chest, hurling her into the wall with a nasty thud. Even the redcaps stopped chasing Puck around and looked back.

I scrambled to my feet, ignoring the way my muscles screamed in protest. I staggered toward Grumly, hoping the ogre wouldn’t forget and smash me into pudding. He didn’t move as I reached the chains, the cruel iron manacle digging into his flesh. Shoving the key into the hole, I turned it until it clicked. The iron band loosened and dropped away.

Grumly roared, a roar filled with triumph and rage. He spun, surprisingly quick for his bulk, and kicked a redcap into the wall. Puck scrambled out of the way as the ogre raised a foot and stomped two more like roaches. The redcaps went berserk. Snarling and screeching, they swarmed Grumly’s feet, pounding them with bats and sinking teeth into his ankles. Grumly stomped and kicked, barely missing me, and the ground shook with his blows, but I didn’t have the strength to move.

Dodging the carnage, Puck grabbed me and pulled me away from the battle. “Let’s go,” he muttered, looking back over his shoulder. “While they’re distracted. Head for the trod.”

“What about Grimalkin?”

“I am here,” the cat said, appearing beside me. His voice sounded strained, and he favored his left forepaw, but otherwise seemed fine. “It is definitely time to leave.”

We staggered toward the open door, but found our path blocked by Shard. “No,” the sidhe growled. Her left arm hung limp, but she raised an ice spear and angled it at my chest. “You will not pass. You will die here, and I will nail you to the wall for everyone to see.”

A rumbling growl echoed behind us, and heavy footsteps shook the ground.

“Grumly,” Shard said without taking her eyes from me, “kill them. All is forgiven. Rip them apart, slowly. Do it, now.”

Grumly growled again, and a thick leg landed next to me. “Frrriends,” the ogre rumbled, standing over us. “Free Grumly. Grumly’s friends.” He took another step, the raw, chafed wound on his leg smelling of gangrene and rot. “Kill mistress,” he growled.

“What?” Shard backed away, her eyes widening. Grumly shuffled forward, raising his huge fists. “What are you doing? Get back, you stupid thing. I command you! No, no!”

“Let’s go,” Puck whispered, tugging my arm. We ducked under Grumly’s legs and sprinted for the open door. The last thing I saw, as the door closed behind us, was Grumly looming over his former master, and Shard bringing up her spear as she backed away.

* * *

THE CORRIDOR STRETCHED AWAY before us, filled with mist and flickering lights. I slumped against the wall, shaking as the adrenaline wore off.

“You all right, princess?” Puck asked, green eyes bright with concern. I staggered forward and threw my arms around him, hugging him tightly. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. I felt his warmth and the rapid beat of his heart, his breath against my ear. Finally, I pulled away and sank back against the wall, drawing him down with me.

“I thought Oberon changed you into a bird,” I whispered.

“He did,” Puck answered with a shrug. “But when he discovered you had run away, he sent me to find you.”

“So, it was you I heard following us,” Grimalkin said, nearly invisible in the mist.

Puck nodded. “I figured you were heading for the Unseelie Court. Who do you think created that shortcut? Anyway, once I was out, I sniffed around and a piskie told me he saw you heading for this part of town. I knew Shard owned a club here, and the rest, as the mortals say, is history.”

“I’m glad you came,” I said, standing up. My legs felt a bit stronger now, and the shaking had almost stopped. “You saved my life. Again. I know you might not want to hear it, but thanks.”

Puck gave me a sidelong glance that I didn’t like at all. “Don’t thank me just yet, princess. Oberon was quite upset that you had left the safety

of the Seelie territories." He rubbed his hands and looked uncomfortable. "I'm supposed to bring you back to Court."

I stared at him, feeling as though he'd just kicked me in the stomach. "But…you won't, right?" I stammered. He looked away, and my desperation grew. "Puck, you can't. I have to find Ethan. I have to go to the Unseelie Court and bring him home."

Puck scrubbed a hand through his hair, a strangely human gesture. "You don't understand," he said, sounding uncharacteristically unsure. "I'm Oberon's favorite lackey, but I can only push him so far. If I fail him again, I might end up a lot worse than a raven for two centuries. He could banish me from the Nevernever for all time. I'd never be able to go home."

"Please," I begged, taking his hand. He still didn't look at me. "Help us. Puck, I've known you forever. Don't do this." I dropped his hand and stared at him, narrowing my eyes. "You realize you'll have to drag me back kicking and screaming, and I'll never speak to you again."

"Don't be like that." Puck finally looked up. "You don't realize what you're doing. If Mab finds you…you don't know what she's capable of."

"I don't care. All I know is, my brother is still out there, in trouble. I have to find him. And I'm going to do it with or without your help."

Puck's eyes glittered. "I could cast a charm spell over you," he mused, one corner of his lip quirking up. "That would solve a lot of problems."

"No," Grimalkin spoke up before I could explode, "you will not. And you know you will not, so stop posturing. Besides, I have something that might solve this little problem."

"Oh?"

"A favor." Grimalkin waved his tail languidly. "From the king."

"That won't stop Oberon from banishing me."

"No," Grimalkin agreed. "But I could request that you be banished for a limited time only. A few decades or so. It is better than nothing."

"Uh-huh." Puck sounded unconvinced. "And this would just cost me a small favor in return, is that right?"

"You pulled me into this conflict the moment you dropped this girl into my tree," Grimalkin said, blinking lazily. "I cannot believe that was an act of coincidence, not from the infamous Robin Goodfellow. You should have known it might come to this."

“I know better than to make deals with a cait sith,” Puck shot back, then sighed, scrubbing a hand over his eyes. “Fine,” he said at last. “You win, princess. Freedom is highly overrated, anyway. If I’m going to do anything, I might as well do it big.”

My heart lifted. “So, you’ll help us?”

“Sure, why not?” Puck gave me a resigned smile. “You’d get eaten alive without me. Besides, storming the Unseelie Court?” His grin widened. “Can’t pass that up for anything.”

“Then let us go,” Grimalkin said as Puck pulled me to my feet. “The longer we tarry, the farther word will spread about our intentions. Tir Na Nog is not far now.” He turned and trotted down the corridor, his tail held upright in the fog.

We followed the hallway for several minutes. After a while, the air turned cold and sharp; frost coated the walls of the corridor, and icicles dangled from the ceiling.

“We are getting close,” came Grimalkin’s disembodied voice in the mist.

The hallway ended with a simple wooden door. A thin powder of snow lined the bottom crack, and the door trembled and creaked in the wind howling just outside.

Puck stepped forward. “Ladies and felines,” he stated grandly, grasping the doorknob, “welcome to Tir Na Nog. Land of endless winter and shitloads of snow.”

A billow of freezing powder caressed my face as he pulled the door open. Blinking away ice crystals, I stepped forward.

I stood in a frozen garden, the thornbushes on the fence coated with ice, a cherub fountain in the center of the yard spouting frozen water. In the distance, beyond the barren trees and thorny scrub, I saw the pointed roof of a huge Victorian estate. I glanced back for Grim and Puck and saw them standing under a trellis hung with purple vines and crystal blue flowers. As they stepped through, the corridor vanished behind them.

“Charming,” Puck commented, gazing around in distaste. “I love the barren, dead feel they’re going for. Who’s the gardener, I wonder? I’d love to get some tips.”

I was already shivering. “H-how far are we from Queen Mab’s court?” I asked, my teeth chattering.

“The Winter Court is maybe two days’ walk from here,” Grimalkin said, leaping onto a tree stump. He shook his paws, one by one, and sat down carefully. “We should find shelter soon. I am uncomfortable in this weather, and the girl will certainly freeze to death.”

A dark chuckle echoed across the garden. “I wouldn’t worry about that now.”

A figure stepped out from behind a tree, sword held loosely in one hand. My heart skipped a beat, and then picked up again, louder and more irregular than before. The breeze ruffled the figure’s black hair as he moved toward us, graceful and silent as a shadow. Grimalkin hissed and disappeared, and Puck shoved me behind him.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Ash murmured into the silence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Iron Fey

"Ash," I whispered as the lean, stealthy figure glided toward us, his boots making no sound in the snow. He was devastatingly gorgeous, dressed all in black, his pale face seeming to float over the ground. I remembered the way he smiled, the look in his silver eyes as we danced. He wasn't smiling now, and his eyes were cold. This wasn't the prince I'd danced with Elysium night; this wasn't anything but a predator.

"Ash," Puck repeated in a conversational tone, though his face had gone hard and feral. "What a surprise to see you here. How did you find us?"

"It wasn't difficult." Ash sounded bored. "The princess mentioned that she was looking for someone within Mab's court. There are only so many ways into Tir Na Nog from the mortal world, and Shard doesn't exactly make it a secret that she guards the trod. I figured it was only a matter of time before you came here."

"Very clever," Puck said, smirking. "But then, you were always the strategist, weren't you? What do you want, Ash?"

"Your head," Ash answered softly. "On a pike. But what I want doesn't matter this time." He pointed his sword at me. "I've come for her."

I gasped as my heart and stomach began careening around my chest. *He's here for me, to kill me, like he promised at Elysium.*

"Over my dead body." Puck smiled, as if this was a friendly conversation on the street, but I felt muscles coiling under his skin.

"That was part of the plan." The prince raised his sword, the icy blade wreathed in mist. "I will avenge her today, and put her memory to rest." For a moment, a shadow of anguish flitted across his face, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were cold and glittered with malice. "Prepare yourself."

"Stay back, princess," Puck warned, pushing me out of the way. He reached into his boot and pulled out a dagger, the curved blade clear as

glass. “This might get a little rough.”

“Puck, no.” I clutched at his sleeve. “Don’t fight him. Someone could die.”

“Duels to the death tend to end that way.” Puck grinned, but it was a savage thing, grim and frightening. “But I’m touched that you care. One moment, princeling,” he called to Ash, who inclined his head. Taking my wrist, Puck steered me behind the fountain and bent close, his breath warm on my face.

“I have to do this, princess,” he said firmly. “Ash won’t let us go without a fight, and this has been coming for a long time now.” For a moment, a shadow of regret flickered across his face, but then it was gone.

“So,” he murmured, grinning as he tilted my chin up, “before I march off to battle, how ’bout a kiss for luck?”

I hesitated, wondering why now, of all times, he would ask for a kiss. He certainly didn’t think of me in that way…did he? I shook myself. There was no time to wonder about that. Leaning forward, I kissed him on the cheek. His skin was warm, and bristly with stubble. “Don’t die,” I whispered, pulling back.

Puck looked disappointed, but only for a second. “Me? Die? Didn’t they tell you, princess? I’m Robin Goodfellow.”

With a whoop, he flourished his knife and charged the waiting prince.

Ash lunged, a dark blur across the snow, his sword hissing down in a vicious arc. Puck leaped out of the way, and the blow sent a miniature blizzard arching toward me. I gasped, the freezing spray stinging like needles, and rubbed at my burning eyes. When I could open them again, Ash and Puck were deep in battle, and it looked like each was intent on killing the other.

Puck ducked a savage blow and tossed Ash something from his pocket. It erupted into a large boar, squealing madly as it charged the prince, tusks gleaming. The ice sword hammered into it, and the boar exploded in a swirl of dry leaves. Ash flung out his arm, and a spray of glittering ice shards flew toward Puck like daggers. I cried out, but Puck inhaled and blew in their direction, like he was blowing out a birthday candle. The shards shimmered into daisies, raining harmlessly around him, and he grinned.

Ash attacked viciously, his blade singing as he bore down on his opponent. Puck dodged and parried with his dagger, retreating before the

onslaught of the Winter prince. Diving away, Puck snatched a handful of twigs from the base of the tree, blew on them, and tossed them into the air —

—and now there were *three* Pucks, grinning wickedly as they set upon their opponent. Three knives flashed, three bodies surrounded the dark prince, as the real Puck leaned against the tree and watched Ash struggle.

But Ash was far from beaten. He spun away from the Pucks, his sword a blur as he dodged and parried, whirling from one attack to the next. He ducked beneath an opponent's guard, ripped his blade up, and sliced cleanly through a Puck's stomach. The doppelgänger split in two, changing into a severed stick that dropped away. Ash spun to meet the Puck rushing up from the side. His sword whirled, and Puck's head dropped from his shoulders before reverting to a twig. The last Puck charged the prince from behind, dagger raised high. Ash didn't even turn, but rammed his blade backward, point up. Puck's lunge carried him onto the blade and drove it through his stomach, the point erupting out his back. The prince yanked the sword free without turning, and a shattered twig dropped to the snow.

Ash lowered his sword, gazing around warily. Following his gaze, I gave a start. Puck had disappeared, pulling a Grimalkin while we were distracted. Instantly wary, the Winter prince scanned the garden, edging forward with his sword raised. His gaze flicked to me, and I tensed, but he dismissed me almost as quickly, stepping beneath the boughs of a frozen pine.

As Ash stepped under the branches, something leaped out of the snow, howling. The prince dodged, the knife barely missing him, and Puck overbalanced, stumbling forward. With a snarl, Ash drove the point of the sword through Puck's back and out his chest, pinning him to the ground.

I screamed, but as I did, the body vanished. For a split second, Ash stared at the pierced leaf on his sword tip, then threw himself to the side as something dropped from the tree, dagger flashing in the light.

Puck's laughter rang out as Ash rolled to his feet, clutching his arm. Blood seeped between pale fingers. "Almost too slow that time, prince," Puck mocked, balancing the dagger on two fingers. "Really, that's the oldest trick in the book. I know, 'cause I *wrote* the book. I've got a million more, if you want to keep playing."

"I'm getting tired of sparring with copies." Ash straightened, dropping his hand. "I guess honor isn't as prevalent in the Seelie Court as I thought.

Are you the real Puck, or is he too cowardly to face me himself?"

Puck regarded him disdainfully, before shimmering into nothingness. Another Puck stepped out from behind a tree, a nasty grin on his face.

"All right, then, prince," he said, smirking as he approached, "if that's what you want, I'll kill you the old-fashioned way." And they flew at each other again.

I watched the battle, my heart in my throat, wishing I could do something. I didn't want either of them to die, but I had no idea how to stop this. Shouting or rushing between them seemed like a really bad idea; one could be distracted, and the other would waste no time finishing him off. A sick despair churned in my stomach. I hadn't realized Puck was so bloodthirsty, but the mad gleam in his eyes told me he would kill the Winter prince if he could.

They have a history, I realized, watching Ash cut viciously at Puck's face, barely missing as his opponent ducked. *Something happened between them, to make them hate each other. I wonder if they were ever friends.*

My skin prickled, an uneasy shiver from more than the cold. Over the clang and screech of metal, I heard something else, a faint rustling, as if a thousand insects were scuttling toward us.

"Run!" Grimalkin's voice made me jump. Tracks appeared in the snow, rushing toward me, and invisible claws scrabbled against bark as the feline fled up a tree. "Something is coming! Hide, quickly!"

I glanced at Puck and Ash, still locked in combat. The rustling grew louder, accompanied by static and faint, high-pitched laughter. Suddenly, through the trees, hundreds of eyes glowed electric-green in the darkness, surrounding us. Puck and Ash stopped fighting and broke apart, finally aware that something was wrong, but it was too late.

They poured over the ground like a living carpet, appearing from everywhere: small, black-skinned creatures with spindly arms, huge ears, and razor grins that shone blue-white in the darkness. I heard the boys' cries of shock, and Grimalkin's yowl of horror as he fled farther up the tree. The creatures spotted me, and I had no time to react. They swarmed me like angry wasps, crawling up my legs, hurling themselves onto my back. I felt claws dig into my skin, my ears filled with loud buzzing and shrieking laughter, and I screamed, thrashing wildly. I couldn't see, didn't know which way was up. The weight of their bodies bore me down, and I

fell onto a grasping, wriggling mass. Hundreds of hands lifted me up, like ants carrying a grasshopper, and began to cart me away.

"Puck!" I screamed, struggling to free myself. But whenever I rolled away from one group, a dozen more slid in to take their place, bearing me up. I never touched the ground. "Grimalkin! Help!"

Their cries seemed distant and far away. Carried on a buzzing, living mattress, I glided rapidly over the ground and into the waiting darkness.

* * *

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG they carried me. When I struggled, the claws gripping me would dig into my skin, turning the mattress into a bed of needles. I soon ceased thrashing about, and tried to concentrate on where they were taking me. But it was difficult; being carried on my back, the only thing I saw clearly was the sky. I tried to turn my head, but the creatures had their claws sunk into my hair and would yank on it until tears formed in my eyes. I resigned myself to lying still, shivering with cold, waiting to see what would happen. The cold and the gnawing worry drained me…. I allowed my eyes to slip closed, and found solace in the darkness.

When I opened my eyes again, the night sky had disappeared, replaced by a ceiling of solid ice. I realized we were traveling underground. The air grew even colder as the tunnel opened up into a magnificent ice cavern, glistening with a jagged, alien beauty. Huge icicles dripped from the ceiling, some longer than I was tall and wickedly sharp. It was a tad disturbing passing under those bristling spikes, watching them sparkle like crystal chandeliers, praying they wouldn't fall.

My teeth chattered, and my lips were numb with cold. However, as we traveled deeper into the cave, the air gradually warmed. A faint noise echoed through the lower caverns: a roaring, hissing sound, like steam escaping a cracked pipe. Water dripped from the ceiling in rivulets now, soaking my clothes, and some of the ice shards looked dangerously unstable.

The hissing grew louder, punctuated with great roaring coughs and the acrid smell of smoke. Now I saw that some of the icicles had indeed fallen, smashed to pieces on the ground and glittering like broken glass.

My abductors brought me into a large cavern littered with shattered shards of ice. Puddles saturated the floor, and water fell like rain from the ceiling. The creatures dropped me to the icy ground and scuttled off. I rubbed my numb, aching limbs and looked around, wondering where I was. The cave was mostly empty, save for a wooden box filled with black rocks—coal?—in one corner. More were stacked along the far wall, next to a wooden archway that led off into the darkness.

A piercing whistle, like a steam engine roaring into the station, erupted from the tunnel, and black smoke churned from the opening. I smelled ashes and brimstone, and then a deep voice echoed throughout the cavern. "HAVE YOU BROUGHT HER?"

The scuttling creatures scattered, and several icicles smashed to the floor with an almost musical chime. I ducked behind an ice column as heavy footsteps clanked down the tunnel. Through the smoke, I saw something huge and grossly distorted, something definitely not human, and shook in terror.

A massive black horse emerged from the writhing smoke, eyes glowing like hot coals, flared nostrils blowing steam. It was as big as the horses that pulled the Budweiser wagon, but there the resemblance ended. At first, I thought it was covered in iron plates; its hide was bulky with metal, rusted and black, and it moved awkwardly with the weight. Then I realized its body was *made* of iron. Pistons and gears jutted out from its ribs. Its mane and tail were steel cables, and a great fire burned in its belly, visible through the chinks in its hide. Its face was a terrifying mask as it turned to me, blasting flame from its nostrils.

I fell back, certain I was going to die.

"ARE YOU MEGHAN CHASE?" The horse's voice shook the room. More icicles committed suicide, but they were the least of my worries. I cringed back as the iron monster loomed over me, tossing its head and snorting flame. "ANSWER ME, HUMAN. ARE YOU MEGHAN CHASE, DAUGHTER OF THE SUMMER KING?"

"Yes," I whispered as the horse moved closer, iron hooves pounding the ice. "Who are you? What do you want with me?"

"I AM IRONHORSE," the beast replied, "ONE OF KING MACHINA'S LIEUTENANTS. I HAVE BROUGHT YOU HERE BECAUSE MY LORD HAS REQUESTED IT. YOU WILL COME WITH ME TO SEE THE IRON KING."

The booming voice was giving me a headache. I tried to focus through the pounding in my skull. “The Iron King?” I asked stupidly. “Who—?”

“KING MACHINA,” Ironhorse confirmed. “SOVEREIGN LORD OF THE IRON COURT, AND RULER OF THE IRON FEY.”

Iron fey?

A chill slid up my spine. I looked around, at the countless eyes of the gremlinlike monsters, to the massive bulk of Ironhorse, and felt dizzy at the implications. Iron fey? Could there be such a thing? In all the stories, poems, and plays, I’d never encountered anything like this. Where did they come from? And who was this Machina, ruler of the Iron Fey? More important…

“What does he want with me?”

“IT IS NOT MINE TO KNOW.” Ironhorse snorted, swishing its tail with a clanking sound. “I ONLY OBEY. HOWEVER, YOU WOULD BE WISE TO COME WITH US, IF YOU WISH TO SEE YOUR BROTHER AGAIN.”

“Ethan?” I jerked my head up, glaring at Ironhorse’s expressionless mask. “How do you know about him?” I demanded. “Is he all right? Where is he?”

“COME WITH ME, AND ALL YOUR QUESTIONS WILL BE ANSWERED. THE IRON COURT AND MY LORD MACHINA AWAIT.”

I stood as Ironhorse turned, clanking back toward the tunnel. Its pistons creaked and the gears complained loudly as it shuffled forward. It was old, I realized, watching a bolt come loose and fall to the ground. A relic of days gone by. I wondered if there were newer, sleeker models out there, and what they looked like. Faster, better, more superior iron fey. After a moment, I decided I didn’t want to find out.

Ironhorse stood at the mouth of the tunnel, stamping impatiently. Sparks flew from its hooves as it glowered at me. “COME,” it ordered, with a blast of steam from its nostrils. “FOLLOW THE TROD TO THE IRON COURT. IF YOU WILL NOT WALK, THE GREMLINS WILL CARRY YOU.” It tossed its head and reared, flames shooting out its muzzle. “OR PERHAPS I WILL RUN BEHIND YOU, BREATHING FIRE __”

An ice spear flew through the air, striking Ironhorse between the ribs, bursting into steam as the fire engulfed it. The horse screamed, a high-

pitched whistle, and whirled, hooves sparking as they struck the ice. The gremlins skittered forward, gazing wildly about, searching for intruders.

"Hey, ugly!" called a familiar voice. "Nice place you got here! Here's a thought, though. Next time, try a hideout a little more resistant to fire than an ice cave!"

"Puck!" I cried, and the red-haired elf waved at me, grinning from the far side of the cavern. Ironhorse screamed and charged, scattering gremlins like birds as he bore down on Puck. Puck didn't move, and the great iron beast knocked him flat in the ice, trampling him with his steel hooves.

"Oh, that looked painful," called another Puck, a little farther down. "We really need to talk about your anger-management issues."

With a roar, Ironhorse charged the second Puck, moving farther away from me and the trod. The gremlins followed, laughing and hissing, but kept a fair distance from the raging beast and its hooves.

A cool hand clamped over my mouth, muffling my startled shriek. I turned to gaze into glittering silver eyes.

"Ash?"

"This way," he said in a low voice, tugging on my hand, "while the idiot has them distracted."

"No, wait," I whispered, pulling back. "He knows about Ethan. I have to find my brother—"

Ash narrowed his eyes. "Hesitate now, and Goodfellow will die. Besides…" He reached out and took my hand again. "I'm not giving you a choice."

Dazed, I followed the Winter prince along the wall of the cavern, too stunned to ask why he was helping me. Didn't he want to kill me? Was this rescue just to get me alone to finish the job in peace? But that didn't make any sense; he could have just killed me while Puck was distracted with Ironhorse.

"Hellooooooooo." Puck's voice echoed farther down the cavern. "Sorry, ugly, wrong me! Keep going, I'm sure you'll get it right next time!"

Ironhorse looked up from stomping a fake Puck into the ground, crimson eyes blazing with hate. Seeing yet another Puck, it tensed iron muscles to charge, when one of the gremlins spotted us sneaking along the wall and gave a yelp of alarm.

Ironhorse whirled, eyes flaring as they settled on us. Ash muttered a curse. With a bellow and a blast of flame from its nostrils, it charged, bearing down on us like the steam engine it was named for. Ash drew his sword and flung a shower of ice shards at the monster. They shattered harmlessly on its armored hide, doing nothing but enraging it further. As the roaring, flaming bulk of metal descended, Ash shoved me out of the way and dove forward, the flailing hooves missing him by inches. Rolling to his feet behind the monster, he cut at its flank, but Ironhorse plunged its head down and kicked him in the ribs. There was a sickening crack, and Ash was hurled away, crumpling to the floor in a heap.

A screaming flock of ravens descended on Ironhorse before it could stomp Ash into the ground. They swirled around its head, pecking and clawing, and Ironhorse roared as it lashed out at the flock, blasting them to cindery bits. Ash staggered to his feet as Puck appeared beside us, grabbing my hand.

"Time to go," he announced cheerfully. "Prince, either keep up or get left behind. We're leaving."

We ran through the caverns, slipping on ice and slush, the insane roars of Ironhorse and the hissing of the gremlins on our heels. I didn't dare look back. The cavern shook, and icicles smashed to the ground all around us, spraying me with stinging shards, but we kept going.

A fuzzy gray shape bounded toward us, tail held high. "You found her," Grimalkin said, stopping to glare at Puck. "Idiot. I told you not to fight the horse thing."

"Can't talk now, little busy at the moment!" Puck gasped as we tore past the feline, continuing down the tunnel. Grimalkin flattened his ears and joined us as the shrieks of the gremlins ricocheted off the walls. I could see the mouth of the cave, dripping with icicles, and put on a burst of speed.

Ironhorse bellowed, and an ice shard smashed down inches from my face.

"Collapse the cave!" Grimalkin shouted, bounding along beside us. "Bring the ceiling down on their heads! Do it!" He zipped away, through the cave entrance, and was gone.

We burst out of the cave moments later, gasping, stumbling in the snow. Looking back, I saw dozens of green eyes skittering forward, heard the pounding hooves of Ironhorse as he followed close behind.

“Keep going!” Ash cried, and whirled around. Closing his eyes, he brought a fist to his face and bowed his head. The gremlins swarmed toward him, and the red glow of Ironhorse appeared, flames streaming in the darkness.

Ash opened his eyes and flung out a hand.

A low rumble shook the ground, and the cave trembled. Huge clumps of icicles shivered, wobbling back and forth. As the gremlins reached the mouth of the cave, the entire ceiling collapsed with a roar and a sound like breaking glass. Gremlins shrieked as they were crushed under several tons of ice and rock, and the dismayed bellow of Ironhorse rose above the cacophony.

The noise died away, and silence fell. Ash, standing two feet from the solid wall of ice sealing the cave, collapsed into the snow.

Puck grabbed my arm as I rushed forward. “Whoa, whoa, princess,” he said as I tried yanking free. “What do you think you’re doing? In case you forgot, princeling there is the enemy. We don’t help the enemy.”

“He’s hurt.”

“All the more reason to leave now.”

“He just saved our lives!”

“Technically, he was saving his own life,” Puck replied, still not letting go. I shoved him, hard, and he finally released me. “Look, princess.” He sighed as I glared at him. “Do you think Ash will play nice now? The only reason he helped—the only reason he agreed to a truce—was so he could bring you to Mab. She wants you alive, to use as leverage against Oberon. That’s the *only* reason he came along. If he wasn’t hurt, he’d be trying to kill me now.”

I looked at Ash, lying motionless in the snow. Flakes speckled his body—soon they would hide him completely. “We can’t just leave him to die.”

“He’s a Winter prince, Meghan. He won’t freeze to death, trust me.”

I scowled at him. “You’re just as bad as they are.” He blinked, startled, and I turned away from him. “I’m going to see if he’s all right, at least. Either come along or get out of my way.”

Puck threw up his hands. “Fine, princess. I’ll help the son of Mab, eternal enemy of our court. Even though he’ll probably stick a sword in my back the second my guard is down.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Ash muttered, rising slowly to his feet. One hand gripped his sword; the other arm was wrapped around his ribs.

He shook the snow from his hair and raised his weapon. “We can continue now, if you like.”

Grinning, Puck pulled his dagger. “I’d be thrilled,” he muttered, taking a step forward. “This won’t take long at all.”

I threw myself between them.

“Stop it!” I hissed, glaring at both in turn. “Stop it right now! Put your weapons up, both of you! Ash, you’re in no condition to fight, and, Puck, shame on you, agreeing to duel him when he’s obviously hurt. Sit down and shut up.”

They blinked at me, astounded, but slowly lowered their weapons. A sneezing laugh rang out in the branches of a tree, and Grimalkin peered down, swishing his tail in mirth.

“A daughter of Oberon after all,” he called, baring his teeth in a feline grin. “Queen Titania would be proud.”

Puck shrugged and flopped down on a log, crossing his arms and legs. Ash continued to stand, watching me with an unreadable expression. Ignoring Puck, I walked up to him. His eyes narrowed, and he tensed, raising his sword, but I wasn’t afraid. For the first time since I came here, I wasn’t afraid at all.

“Prince Ash,” I murmured, drawing closer, “I propose we make a deal.”

Surprise flickered across his face.

“We need your help,” I continued, gazing straight into his eyes. “I don’t know what those things were, but they called themselves iron fey. They also mentioned someone called Machina, the Iron King. Do you know who that is?”

“The Iron King?” Ash shook his head. “There is no one by that name in the courts. If this King Machina exists, he is a danger to all of us. Both courts will want to know about him and these…iron fey.”

“I need to find him,” I said, forcing as much determination into my voice as I could. “He’s got my brother. I need you to help us escape the Unseelie territory and find the court of the Iron King.”

Ash raised an eyebrow. “And why would I do that?” he asked softly. Not mocking, but dead serious.

I swallowed. “You’re injured,” I pointed out, holding his gaze. “You won’t be able to take me by force, not with Puck so eager to stick a knife in your ribs.” I glanced back at Puck, sulking on the log, and lowered my

voice. “Here’s my bargain. If you help me find my brother and get him safely home, then I’ll go with you to the Unseelie Court. Without a fight, from me or Puck.”

Ash’s eyes gleamed. “He means that much to you? You would exchange your freedom for his safety?”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes.” The word hung in the air between us, and I hurried on before I could take it back. “So, do we have a deal?”

He inclined his head, as if still trying to puzzle me out. “No, Meghan Chase. We have a contract.”

“Good.” My legs trembled. I backed away from him, needing to sit before I fell over. “And no trying to kill Puck, either.”

“That wasn’t part of the bargain,” Ash said, before he grimaced and sank to his knees, arms around his middle. Dark blood trickled between his lips.

“Puck!” I called, turning to glare at the faery on the log. “Get over here and help.”

“Oh, we’re playing nice now?” Puck remained seated, looking anything but compliant. “Shall we have tea first? Brew up a nice pot of kiss-my-ass?”

“Puck!” I shouted in exasperation, but Ash raised his head and stared at his enemy.

“Truce, Goodfellow,” he grated out. “The Chillsorrow manor is a few miles east of here. Right now, the lady of the house is away at court, so we’ll be safe there. I suggest we postpone our duel until we arrive and the princess is out of the cold. Unless you’d like to kill me now.”

“No, no. We can kill each other later.” Puck hopped off the stump and padded up, shoving his dagger into his boot. Putting the prince’s arm over his shoulders, he jerked him to his feet. Ash grunted and pursed his lips but didn’t cry out. I glared at Puck. He ignored me.

“Off we go.” Puck sighed. “You coming, Grimalkin?”

“Oh, definitely.” Grimalkin landed with a soft thump in the snow. His golden eyes, bright with amusement, regarded me knowingly. “I would not miss this for the world.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Oracle

The Chillsorrow manor lived up to its name. The outside of the sprawling estate was blanketed in ice, the lawn was frozen, the numerous thorn trees were encased in crystallized water. Inside wasn't much better. The stairways were slick, the floors resembled ice rinks, and my breath hung in the air as we made our way through the frigid, narrow halls. At least the servants were helpful, if extremely creepy; skeleton-thin gnomes with pure white skin and long, long fingers glided silently around the house, not saying a word. Their pupil-less black eyes seemed too big for their faces, and they had the unnerving habit of staring at you mournfully, as if you had a fatal disease and were not long for the world.

Still, they welcomed us into the house, bowing respectfully to Ash, making him comfortable in one of the rooms. The biting chill didn't affect the Winter prince, though I was shaking, teeth chattering, until one of the servants offered me a heavy quilt and padded off without a word.

Clutching the quilt gratefully, I peeked into the room where Ash sat on a bed surrounded by ice gnomes. His shirt was off, showing his lean, muscular arms and chest. He was built more like a dancer or martial artist than a bodybuilder, the elegant frame hinting at a grace a human simply could not match. His tousled black hair fell into his eyes, and he absently raked it out of his face.

My stomach fluttered weirdly, and I backed out into the hall. *What are you doing?* I asked myself, appalled. *That is Ash, prince of the Unseelie Court. He tried to kill Puck, and he might try to kill you, as well. He is not sexy. He's not.*

But he was, extremely, and it was useless to deny it. My heart and my brain were at odds, and I knew I'd better come to terms with this quickly. *Okay, fine,* I told myself, *he's gorgeous, I'll admit it. I'm just reacting to his good looks, that's all. All the sidhe are stunning and beautiful. It doesn't mean anything.*

With that thought to buoy me, I stepped back into the room.

Ash glanced up as I approached, the quilt wrapped around my shoulders. A pair of gnomes were wrapping his torso in bandages, but above his stomach, I could see an angry black welt.

"Is that where—?"

Ash nodded, once. I continued to stare at it, noting how the flesh was blackened and crusted with scabs. I shuddered and looked away.

"It looks almost burned."

"The creature's hooves were made of iron," Ash replied. "Iron tends to burn, when it doesn't kill outright. I was lucky the blow wasn't over my heart." The gnomes tugged the bandages tight, and he winced.

"How bad are you hurt?"

He gave me an appraising look. "The fey heal faster than you mortals," he answered, and rose gracefully to his feet, scattering gnomes. "Especially if we're within our own territories. Except for this—" he lightly touched the iron burn on his ribs "—I should be fine by tomorrow."

"Oh." I was a bit breathless, suddenly unable to take my eyes from him. "That's…good, then."

He smiled then, a cold, humorless gesture, and stepped closer.

"Good?" His voice was mocking. "You shouldn't wish for my good health, princess. It would've been easier for you if Puck had killed me when he had the chance."

I resisted the urge to back away from him. "No, it wouldn't." His shadow loomed over me, prickling my skin, but I stood my ground. "I need your help, both to get out of Unseelie territory, and to find my brother. Besides, I couldn't let him kill you in cold blood."

"Why not?" He was very close now, so close I could see the pale scars on his chest. "He seems very devoted to you. Perhaps you'll wait until we leave Tir Na Nog to have him stab me in the back? What would happen if we fought again, and I killed him?"

"Stop it." I glared at him, meeting his eyes. "Why are you doing this? I gave you my word. Why are you pulling this crap now?"

"Just want to see where you stand, princess." Ash backed up a step, no longer smiling. "I like to get a feel for my enemies before we engage in combat. See what their strengths and weaknesses are."

"We aren't in combat—"

“Combat doesn’t have to be with swords.” Ash walked back to the bed, drawing his blade and examining the gleaming length. “Emotions can be deadly weapons, and knowing your enemy’s breaking point can be key to winning a battle. For example…” He turned and pointed the sword, staring at me down the polished edge. “You would do anything to find your brother—put yourself in danger, bargain with the enemy, give up your own freedom—if it means saving him. You’d likely do the same for your friends, or anyone else you care about. Your personal loyalty is your breaking point, and your enemies will certainly use it against you. *That* is your weakness, princess. That is the most dangerous aspect in your life.”

“So what?” I challenged, pulling the quilt tighter around myself. “All you’re telling me is I won’t betray my friends or family. If that’s a weakness, it’s one I want.”

He regarded me with glittering eyes, the expression on his face unreadable. “And, if the choice was between saving your brother and letting me die, which would you choose? The answer should be obvious, but could you do it?”

I chewed my lip and remained silent. Ash nodded slowly and turned away. “I’m tired,” he said, sitting down on the bed. “You should find Puck and decide where we go from here. Unless, of course, you know where this Machina’s court is. I do not. If I’m going to help you, I need to rest.”

He lay back and put an arm over his eyes, dismissing me. I backed out and left the room, dark doubts swirling around my head.

In the hallway I met Puck, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “So, how is the handsome princeling?” he mocked, shoving away from the wall. “Will he survive his ordeal to fight another day?”

“He’s fine,” I muttered as Puck fell into step beside me. “He’s got a nasty-looking burn where the horse kicked him, and I think his ribs were broken, but he wouldn’t say.”

“Forgive me if my heart doesn’t bleed for him,” Puck replied, rolling his eyes. “I don’t know how you got him to help, princess, but I wouldn’t trust him further than I could throw him. Deals with the Winter Court are bad news. What did you promise him?”

“Nothing,” I said, not meeting his eyes. I could feel his disbelieving stare, and went on the offensive to distract him. “Look, what’s your deal with him, anyway? He said you stabbed him in the back once. What’s up with that?”

“That…” Puck hesitated, and I could see I’d hit a sore spot. “That was a mistake,” he went on in a quiet voice. “I didn’t mean for that to happen.” He shook himself, and the self-doubt dropped away, replaced by his irritating smirk. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m not the bad guy here, princess.”

“No,” I admitted. “You’re not. But I’m going to need both of you to help get Ethan back. Especially now. Especially since this Iron King wants me so bad. Do you know anything about him?”

Puck sobered. “I’ve never heard of him before,” he murmured as we entered the dining hall. A long table stood in the center of the room, with a magnificent ice sculpture as a centerpiece. Grimalkin crouched on the table with his head in a bowl, eating something that smelled strongly of fish. He glanced up as we entered, licking his jaws with a bright pink tongue.

“Heard of who before?”

“King Machina.” I pulled up a chair and sat down, resting my chin in my hands. “That horse thing—Ironhorse—called him the ruler of the iron fey.”

“Hmm. I have never heard of him.” Grimalkin put his head back in the bowl, chewing loudly. Puck sat down beside me.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” he muttered, mirroring my pose with his chin in his hands. “Iron fey? It’s blasphemous! It goes against everything we know.” He touched his fingers to his brow, narrowing his eyes. “And yet, Ironhorse was most definitely fey. I could sense that. If there are more like him and those gremlin things, Oberon must be informed immediately. If this King Machina brings his iron fey against us, he could destroy the courts before we knew what hit us.”

“But you know nothing about him,” Grimalkin said, his voice echoing inside the bowl. “You have no idea where he is, what his motives are, how many iron fey are actually out there. What would you tell Oberon now? Especially since you have…ahem…fallen out of favor by disobeying him.”

“He’s right,” I said. “We should find out more about this Machina before we tell the courts. What if they decide to confront him now? He might fight back, or he might go into hiding. I can’t risk losing Ethan.”

“Meghan—”

“No telling the courts,” I said firmly, looking him in the eye. “That’s final.”

Puck sighed and threw me a grudging smirk. “Fine, princess,” he said, raising his hands. “We’ll do it your way.”

Grimalkin snickered into the bowl.

“So, how do we find this Machina, anyway?” I asked, voicing the question that had bothered me all evening. “The only trod to his kingdom that we know of is buried under a ton of ice. Where do we start looking for him? He could be anywhere.”

Grimalkin raised his head. “I might know somebody who could help us,” he purred, slitting his eyes. “An oracle of sorts, living within your world. Very old, older even than Puck. Older than Oberon. Almost as old as cats. If anyone could tell you where this Iron King might be, she could.”

My heart leaped. If this oracle could tell me about the Iron King, maybe she would know where my dad was, as well. It couldn’t hurt to ask.

“I thought she died,” Puck said. “If it’s the same oracle I’m thinking of, she vanished ages ago.”

Grimalkin yawned and licked his whiskers. “Not dead,” he replied. “Hardly dead. But she changed her name and appearance so many times, even the oldest fey would hardly remember her. She likes to keep a low profile, you know.”

Puck frowned, knitting his brows together. “Then how is it *you* remember her?” he demanded, sounding indignant.

“I am a cat,” purred Grimalkin.

* * *

I DIDN’T SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT. The numerous quilts didn’t quite protect me from the incessant chill; it crept into whatever cracks it could find, stealing away the heat with frozen fingers. Also, Grimalkin slept on top of me under the blankets, his furry body a blessed warmth, but he kept digging his claws into my skin. Near dawn, after being poked awake yet again, I rose, wrapped a quilt around my shoulders, and went looking for Puck.

Instead, I found Ash in the dining hall, practicing sword drills by the gray light of dawn. His lean, honed body glided over the tiles, sword sweeping gracefully through the air, eyes closed in concentration. I stood

in the doorway and watched for several minutes, unable to tear my gaze away. It was a dance, beautiful and hypnotic. I lost track of the time I stood watching him, and would have happily stayed there all morning, when he opened his eyes and saw me.

I squeaked and straightened guiltily. “Don’t mind me,” I said as he relaxed his stance. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please, continue.”

“I’m finished, anyway.” Sheathing his sword, he regarded me solemnly. “Did you need something?”

I realized I was staring and blushed, turning my gaze away. “Um, no. That is…I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

He gave me a weird little smile. “I have to be on top of my game if I’m going to kill things for you, right?”

I was saved a reply as Puck strolled in, humming, carrying a bowl of strange golden fruit, each about the size of a golf ball. “Mornin’, princess,” he said with his mouth full, plunking the bowl on the table. “Look what I found.”

Ash blinked. “Are you raiding the cellars now, Goodfellow?”

“Me? Stealing?” Puck flashed a devious grin and popped another fruit into his mouth. “In the house of my ancient enemy? What gave you that idea?” He plucked another fruit and tossed it to me with a wink. It was warm and soft, and had the texture of an overripe pear.

Grimalkin leaped onto the table and sniffed. “Summerpod,” he stated, wrapping his tail around himself. “I did not think they grew in the Winter territories.” He turned to me with a serious expression. “Better not eat too many of those,” he warned. “They make faery wine out of that. Your human side will not handle it well.”

“Oh, let her try one,” Puck snorted, rolling his eyes. “She’s been in Faery long enough, eating our food. It won’t turn her into a rat or anything.”

“Where are we going?” Ash questioned, sounding bored with us all. “Did you manage to come up with a plan to find the Iron King, or are we going to paint targets on our backs and wander in circles until he notices?”

I bit into the fruit, and warmth flooded my mouth. I swallowed, and it filled my whole body, driving away the cold. The quilt was suffocatingly hot; I draped it over one of the chairs and gulped the rest of the fruit in one bite.

“You’re awfully eager to help,” Puck drawled, leaning back against the table. “And here I was getting ready for a duel first thing in the morning. Why the change of heart, prince?”

The effects of the summerpod were fading; cold prickled my arms, and my cheeks tingled. Ignoring Grimalkin’s warning glare, I snatched another fruit and popped it into my mouth like Puck had done. Wonderful, delicious warmth surged into me, and I sighed in pleasure.

Ash’s outline blurred at the edges as he faced Puck. “Your princess and I made a bargain,” he said. “I agreed to help her find the Iron King, though I won’t bore you with the details. While I will uphold my end of the contract, it did not involve you in any way. I only promised to help *her*.”

“Which means we’re still free to duel each other anytime we want.”

“Exactly.”

The room swayed slightly. I plunked into a chair and grabbed another summerpod from the bowl, shoving the whole thing in my mouth. Again, I felt that wonderful rush of heat and headiness. Somewhere far away, Puck and Ash were holding a dangerous conversation, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Hooking the edge of the bowl, I pulled the whole thing to me and began popping them like candy.

“Well, why wait?” Puck sounded eager. “We could step outside right now, Your Highness, and get this over with.”

Grimalkin sighed loudly, interrupting the conversation. Both faeries turned and glared at him. “This is all quite fascinating,” Grimalkin said, his voice slurring in my ears, “but instead of posing and scratching the ground like rutting peacocks, perhaps you should look to the girl.”

Both boys glanced at me, and Puck’s eyes got huge. “Princess!” he yelped, springing over and tugging the bowl from my grasping fingers. “You’re not supposed to…Not all of them…. How many of those did you eat?”

“How very like you, Puck.” Ash’s voice came from a great distance, and the room started to spin. “Offer them a taste of faery wine, and act surprised when they’re consumed by it.”

That struck me as hilarious, and I broke into hysterical giggles. And once I began, I couldn’t stop. I laughed until I was gasping for breath, tears streaming down my face. My feet itched and my skin crawled. I needed to move, to do something. I tried standing up, wanting to spin and dance, but the room tilted violently and I fell, still shrieking with laughter.

Somebody caught me, scooping me off my feet and into their arms. I smelled frost and winter, and heard an exasperated sigh from somewhere above my head.

"What are you doing, Ash?" I heard someone ask. A familiar voice, though I couldn't think of his name, or why he sounded so suspicious.

"I'm taking her back to her room." The person above me sounded wonderfully calm and deep. I sighed and settled into his arms. "She'll have to sleep off the effects of the fruit. We'll likely be here another day because of your idiocy."

The other voice said something garbled and unintelligible. I was suddenly too sleepy and light-headed to care. Relaxing against the mysterious person's chest, I fell into a heady sleep.

* * *

I STOOD IN A DARK ROOM, surrounded by machinery. Steel cables as thick as my arm dangled overhead, house-size computers lined the walls, blinking with millions of flashing lights, and thousands of broken televisions, ancient PCs, out-of-date game consoles, and VHS players lay in drifts and heaps throughout the room. Wires covered everything, writhing and slithering along the walls, over the mountains of forgotten technology, dropping in tangled clumps from the ceiling. A loud thrumming filled the area, making the floor vibrate and my teeth buzz.

"Meggie."

The strangled whisper came from behind me. I turned to see a small shape dangling from the wires. They coiled around his arms, chest, and legs, holding him spread-eagled near the ceiling. With horror, I saw some of the wires stabbing *into* him, plugged into his face, neck, and forehead like electrical outlets. He dangled weakly, blue eyes beseeching mine.

"Meggie," Ethan whispered, as something huge and monstrous rose up behind him. "Save me."

I bolted upright, screaming, the image of Ethan dangling from the wires burned into my mind. Grimalkin leaped away with a yowl, sharp claws stabbing into my chest as he fled. I barely felt them. Flinging aside the bedcovers, I raced for the door.

A dark shape rose from a chair against the wall, intercepting me as I tried to bolt through. It caught my upper arms, holding me still as I

struggled with it. All I could see was Ethan's face, contorted in agony, dying in front of me.

"Let go!" I screamed, jerking my arm free and trying to claw my opponent's eyes. "Ethan is out there! I have to save him! Let me go!"

"You don't even know where he is." A hand caught my flailing wrist and pinned it to his chest. Silver eyes glared into mine as he shook me, once. "Listen to me! If you go charging out there without a plan, you'll kill us all and your brother will die. Is that what you want?"

I sagged against him. "No," I whispered, all the fight going out of me. Tears welled, and I shook with the effort of holding them back. I couldn't be weak, not anymore. If I was going to have any hope of saving my brother, I couldn't stand in a corner and cry. I had to be strong.

With a shaky breath, I straightened and wiped my eyes. "Sorry," I whispered, embarrassed. "I'm okay now. No more freaking out, I promise."

Ash still held my hand. Gently, I tried pulling back, but he wasn't letting go. I glanced up and found his face inches from mine, his eyes searingly bright in the shadows of the room.

Time froze around us. My heart stumbled a bit, then picked up, louder and faster than before. Ash's expression was blank; nothing showed on his face or in his eyes, but his body had gone very still. I knew I was blushing like a fire engine. His fingers came up and gently brushed a tear from my cheek, sending a tingle through my skin. I shivered, frightened by the pressure mounting between us, needing to break the tension.

I licked my lips and whispered, "Is this where you say you'll kill me?"

One corner of his lip curled. "If you like," he murmured, a flicker of amusement finally crossing his face. "Though it's gotten far too interesting for that."

Footsteps sounded outside in the hall, and Ash moved away, dropping my hand. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall as Puck entered, Grimalkin loping lazily behind him.

I took a deep, furtive breath and hoped my burning face was lost in the shadows. Puck shot Ash a suspicious glare before looking at me. A sheepish grin crossed his lips.

"Er, how're you feeling, princess?" he asked, lacing both hands behind his head, a sure sign that he was nervous. "Those summerpod fruits pack

quite a punch, don't they? Hey, at least it wasn't bristlewort. You would've spent the rest of the evening as a hedgehog."

I sighed, knowing that was as close to an apology as I would get. "I'm fine," I told him, rolling my eyes. "When do we leave?"

Puck blinked, but Ash answered as if nothing had happened. "Tonight," he said, coming away from the wall, stretching like a panther. "We've wasted enough time here. I assume the cait sith knows the way to this oracle?"

Grimalkin yawned, showing off fangs and a bright pink tongue. "Obviously."

"How far is it?" I asked him.

The cat looked from me to Ash and purred knowingly. "The oracle lives in the human world," he said, "in a large city that sits below sea level. Every year, people dress in costume and throw an enormous fiasco. They dance and eat and toss beads at others for removing their clothing."

"New Orleans," I said, frowning. "You're talking about New Orleans." I groaned, thinking about what it would take to get there. New Orleans was the closest city to our tiny little hick town, but it was still a long drive. I knew, because I'd fantasized about driving to the near-mythical city when I finally got my license. "That's hundreds of miles away!" I protested. "I have no car and no money for a plane ticket. How are we going to get there—or were we planning to hitchhike?"

"Human, the Nevernever touches all borders of the human world." Grimalkin shook his head, sounding impatient. "It has no physical boundaries—you could get to Bora Bora from here if you knew the right trod. Stop thinking in human terms. I am sure the prince knows a path to the city."

"Oh, sure he does," Puck broke in. "Or a path right into the center of the Unseelie Court. Not that I'd mind crashing Mab's party, but I'd like for it to be on my own terms."

"He won't lead us into a trap," I snapped at Puck, who blinked at me. "He promised to help us find the Iron King. He'd be breaking his word if he handed us over to Mab. Right, Ash?"

Ash looked uncomfortable but nodded.

"Right," I repeated, forcing a bravado I didn't feel. I hoped Ash wouldn't betray us, but, as I'd learned, deals with faeries tended to bite you in the ass. I shook off my hesitation and turned to the prince. "So," I

demanded, trying to sound confident, “where can we find this trod to New Orleans?”

“The frost giant ruins,” Ash replied, looking thoughtful. “Very close to Mab’s court.” At Puck’s glare, he shrugged and offered a tiny, rueful smirk. “She goes to Mardi Gras every year.”

I pictured the Queen of the Unseelie Court flashing a couple of drunken partygoers, and giggled uncontrollably. All three shot me a strange look. “Sorry,” I gasped, biting my lip. “Still kind of giddy, I guess. Shall we go, then?”

Puck grinned. “Just let me borrow some supplies.”

* * *

LATER, THE FOUR OF US WALKED down a narrow, ice-slick trail, the Chillsorrow manor growing smaller and smaller behind us. Sometime during the night, the gnomes had disappeared; the house was empty when we left, as if it had been that way for a hundred years. I wore a long robe of gray fur that tinkled musically when I walked, like tiny wind chimes. Puck had given it to me when we were clear of the manor, under the disapproving glare of Ash, and I didn’t dare ask him where he got it. But it kept me perfectly warm and comfortable as we traveled through Mab’s cold, frozen domain.

As we walked, I began to realize that the icy landscape of the Unseelie territory was just as beautiful—and dangerous—as Oberon’s domain. Icicles dangled from the trees, sparkling like diamonds in the light. Occasionally, a skeleton lay beneath them, spears of ice between its bones. Crystal flowers bloomed along the road, petals as hard and delicate as glass, thorns angling toward me as I approached. Once I thought I saw a white bear watching us from atop a hill, a tiny figure perched on its back, but a tree passed in front of my vision and they were gone.

Ash and Puck didn’t say a word to each other as we traveled, which was probably a good thing. The last thing I wanted was another duel to the death. The prince kept a steady, silent march ahead of us, rarely looking back, while Puck entertained me with jokes and useless chatter. I think he was attempting to keep my spirits up, to make me forget about Machina and my brother, and I was grateful for the distraction. Grimalkin vanished

periodically, bounding off into the trees, only to reappear minutes or hours later with no explanation of where he'd been.

Later that afternoon, we reached a range of jagged, ice-covered peaks, and the trek turned sharply uphill. The path grew slick and treacherous, and I had to watch where I put my feet. Puck had fallen back on the trail; he kept casting suspicious looks over his shoulder, as if he feared an ambush from behind. I glanced back at him again, and in that moment, my feet hit a patch of ice and slid out from under me. I flailed, losing my balance on the narrow trail, trying desperately to stay upright and not go tumbling back down the mountain.

Something grabbed my wrist, pulling me forward. I collapsed against a solid chest, my fingers digging into the fabric to keep myself upright. As the adrenaline surge faded and my heartbeat returned to normal, I glanced up and found Ash's face inches from mine, so close I could see my reflection in his silvery eyes.

His nearness made my senses spin, and I couldn't look away. This close, his face was carefully guarded, but I felt the rapid thud of his heart beneath my palm. My own heartbeat picked up in response. He held me a moment longer, just long enough to make my stomach lurch wildly, then stepped away, leaving me breathless in the middle of the trail.

I looked back and found Puck glaring at me. Embarrassed and feeling strangely guilty, I dusted off my clothes and straightened my hair with an indignant huff before following Ash up the mountain.

Puck didn't speak to me after that.

By late evening, it had begun to snow, big, soft flakes drifting lazily from the sky. They literally sang as they fell past my ears, tiny voices dancing on the wind.

Ash stopped in the middle of the path, looking back at us. Flakes dusted his hair and clothes, swirling around him as if alive. "The Unseelie Court isn't far ahead," he said, ignoring the eddies that spun around him. "We should break from the road. Mab has others besides me looking for you, as well."

As he finished, the snow whirled madly around us, shrieking and tearing at our clothes. My fur coat clanged as the blizzard pelted me with snow, burning my cheeks and blinding me. I couldn't breathe; my limbs were frozen stiff to my sides. As the whirlwind calmed, I found myself encased in ice from the neck down, unable to move. Puck was similarly

frozen, except his whole head was covered in crystal glass, his features frozen in shock.

Ash was unharmed, staring at us blankly.

“Dammit, Ash!” I yelled, struggling to free myself. I couldn’t even wiggle a finger. “I thought we had a deal.”

“A deal?” whispered another voice. The whirlwind of snow solidified, merging into a tall woman with long white hair and blue-tinged skin. A white gown draped her elegant body, and her black lips curled into a smile.

“A deal?” she repeated, turning to Ash with a mock horrified look. “Do tell. Ash, darling, I believe you’ve been hiding things from us.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Voodoo Museum

"Narissa," Ash murmured. He sounded disinterested, bored even, though I saw his fingers twitch toward his sword. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The snow faery regarded me like a spider watching an insect in its web, before turning pupil-less black eyes on Ash. "Did I hear her right, darling?" she purred, drifting over the ground toward the prince. "Did you actually make a bargain with the half-breed? As I recall, our queen ordered us to bring the daughter of Oberon to her. Are you fraternizing with the enemy now?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Ash's voice was flat as he leveled a sneer in my direction. "I would never betray my queen. She wants Oberon's daughter, I will bring her Oberon's daughter. And I was in the middle of doing so, until you showed up and interrupted my progress."

Narissa looked unconvinced. "A pretty speech," she crooned, running a finger down Ash's cheek, leaving a trail of frost. "But what of the girl's companion? I believe you swore to kill Robin Goodfellow, Ash darling, and yet you bring him into the heart of our territory. If the queen knew he was here—"

"She would allow me to deal with him on my terms," Ash interrupted, narrowing his eyes. The anger on his face was real now. "I've brought Puck along because I want to kill him slowly, take my time with him. After I've delivered the half-breed, I'll have centuries to exact my vengeance on Robin Goodfellow. And *no one* will deny me that pleasure when it comes."

Narissa floated back. "Of course not, darling," she placated. "But perhaps I should take the half-breed on to court from here. You know how impatient the queen can be, and it really isn't fitting for the prince to be the escort." She smiled and drifted toward me. "I'll just take this burden off your hands."

Ash's sword rasped free, stopping the faery in her tracks. "Take another step and it will be your last."

"How dare you threaten me!" Narissa whirled back, snow flurrying around her. "I offer to help, and this is my reward! Your brother will hear of this."

"I'm sure he will." Ash smiled coldly and didn't lower his sword. "And you can tell Rowan that if he wants to gain Mab's favor, he should capture the half-breed himself, not send you to steal her from me. While you're at it, you can inform Queen Mab that I *will* deliver Oberon's daughter to her, I give my word on that.

"Now," he continued, making a shooing motion with his blade, "it's time for you to leave."

Narissa glared at him a moment longer, her hair billowing around her face. Then she smiled. "Very well, darling. I shall enjoy watching Rowan tear you limb from limb. Until we meet again." She twirled in place, her body dissipating into snow and wind, and blew away into the trees.

Ash sighed, shaking his head. "We need to move fast," he muttered, striding over to me. "Narissa will tell Rowan where we are, and he'll come speeding over to claim you for himself. Hold still."

He raised his sword hilt and brought it smashing down on the ice. The frozen shell cracked and began to chip in places. He sliced down again, and the cracks widened.

"D-don't worry about m-me," I said through chattering teeth. "Help P-Puck. He'll suffocate in th-there!"

"My bargain isn't with Goodfellow," Ash muttered, not looking up from his task. "I don't make a habit of aiding mortal enemies. Besides, he'll be fine. He's survived far worse than being frozen solid. Unfortunately."

I glared at him. "Are you really h-helping us?" I demanded as more bits of the ice shell began to crack. "What you said to Narissa—"

"I told her nothing that wasn't true," Ash interrupted, staring back at me. "I will not betray my queen. When this is over, I will deliver Oberon's half-blood daughter to her, as I promised." He broke eye contact and placed his hand over the ice, where the cracking was the greatest. "I'll just do it a little later than she expects. Close your eyes."

I did, and felt the ice column vibrate. The thrumming grew louder and stronger until, with the sound of breaking glass, the ice shattered into a

million pieces and I was free.

I sagged to the ground, shaking uncontrollably. My robe was coated in ice, the chiming fur silenced. Ash knelt down to help me up, but I slapped his hand away.

"I'm not going anywhere," I growled, "until you get Puck out."

He sighed irritably but rose and walked over to the second frozen mound, putting his hand on it. This time, the ice shattered violently, flying in all directions like crystal shrapnel. Several pieces lodged in a nearby tree trunk, glittering ice daggers sunk deep into the bark. I cringed at the vicious explosion. If he had done that to me, I would've been shredded.

Puck staggered forward, his face bloody, his clothing in tatters. He swayed on his feet, eyes glazed over, and started to fall. I shrieked his name and raced over as he collapsed into my arms.

And disappeared. His body vanished the moment I caught him, and I was left staring at a frayed leaf, spiraling to the ground. Beside me, Ash snorted and shook his head.

"Did you hear everything you wanted, Goodfellow?" he called to the empty air.

"I did," came Puck's disembodied voice, floating out of the trees, "but I'm not sure I believe my ears."

He dropped from the branches of a pine, landing with a thump in the snow. When he straightened, his green eyes blazed with anger. Not directed at Ash, but at me.

"*That's* what you promised him, princess?" he shouted, throwing up his hands. "That was your bargain? You would offer yourself to the Unseelie Court?" He turned and punched a tree, sending twigs and icicles to the ground. "Of all the *stupid* ideas! What is wrong with you?"

I shrank back. This was the first time I'd seen him angry. Not just Puck, but Robbie, too. He never got mad, viewing everything as a colossal joke. Now he looked ready to tear my head off.

"We needed help," I said, watching in horror as his eyes glowed and his hair writhed like flames atop his head. "We have to get out of Unseelie territory and into Machina's realm."

"*I* would have gotten you there!" Puck roared. "Me! You don't need his help! Don't you trust me to keep you safe? I would've given everything for you. Why didn't you think I'd be enough?"

I was struck speechless. Puck sounded *hurt*, glaring at me like I'd just stabbed him in the back. I didn't know what to say. I didn't dare look at Ash, but I sensed he was vastly amused by this whole display.

As we stared at each other, Grimalkin slid out of the brush, a patch of smoke gliding over the snow. His eyes bore that half-lidded, amused look as he glanced at the fuming Puck, then back to me. "It gets more entertaining every day," he purred with his feline grin.

I wasn't in the mood for his sarcasm. "Do you have anything helpful to say, Grim?" I snapped, watching his eyes slit even more.

The cat yawned and sat down to lick himself. "Actually, yes," he murmured, bending to his flanks. "I do have something you might be interested in." He continued washing his tail for several heartbeats, while I fought the urge to grab that tail and swing him around my head like a bolo. Finally, he stretched and looked up, blinking lazily.

"I believe," he purred, stretching it out, "I have found the trod you are looking for."

We followed Grimalkin to the base of an ancient ruined castle, where shattered pillars and broken gargoyles lay scattered about the courtyard. Bones littered the area as well, poking up through the snow, making me nervous. Puck trailed behind, not speaking to any of us, wrapped in angry silence. I made a promise to talk to him later when he'd cooled down, but for now, I was anxious to get out of Unseelie territory.

"There," Grimalkin said, nodding to a large stone pillar broken in two. One half rested on the other, forming an arch between them.

There was also a body lying in front of it. A body that was at least twelve feet tall, covered in hides and furs, with blue-white skin and a tangled white beard. It lay sprawled on its back with its face turned away, one meaty hand clutching a stone club.

Ash grimaced. "That's right," he muttered as we ducked behind a low stone wall. "Mab leaves her pet giant here to guard the place. Cold Tom doesn't listen to anyone but the queen."

I glared at the cat, who looked unconcerned. "You could have mentioned something, Grim. Did you forget that small but ever-so-important detail? Or did you just not see the twelve-foot giant in the middle of the floor?"

Puck, his animosity forgotten, or suppressed, peeked out from behind a boulder. "Looks like its Tom's nappy time," he said. "Maybe we can sneak

around him."

Grimalkin regarded each of us in turn and blinked slowly. "In times like these, I am even more grateful that I am a cat." He sighed, and trotted toward the huge body.

"Grim! Stop!" I hissed after him. "What are you doing?"

The cat ignored me. My heart caught in my throat as he sauntered up to the giant, looking like a fuzzy mouse compared to Tom's bulk. Gazing up at the body, he twitched his tail, crouched, and leaped onto the giant's chest.

I stopped breathing, but the giant didn't move. Perhaps Grimalkin was too light for him to even notice. The cat turned and sat down, curling his tail around his feet and watching us bemusedly.

"Dead," he called to us. "Quite dead, in fact. You can stop cringing in abject terror if you like. I swear, how you survive with noses like that, I will never know. I could smell his stink a mile away."

"He's dead?" Ash immediately walked forward, brow furrowing. "Strange. Cold Tom was one of the strongest in his clan. How did he die?"

Grimalkin yawned. "Perhaps he ate something that disagreed with him."

I edged forward cautiously. Maybe I'd watched too many horror flicks, but I almost expected the "dead" giant to open his eyes and take a swing at us. "What does it matter?" I called to Ash, still keeping a careful eye on the body. "If it's dead, then we can get out of here without having to fight the thing."

"You know nothing," Ash replied. His gaze swept over the corpse, eyes narrowed. "This giant was strong, one of the strongest. Something killed him, within our territory. I want to know what could've taken Cold Tom down like this."

I was close to the giant's head now, close enough to see the blank, bulging eyes, the gray tongue lolling partway out of his mouth. Blue veins stood out around his eye sockets and in his neck. Whatever killed him, it wasn't quick.

Then a metal spider crawled out of his mouth.

I screamed and leaped back. Puck and Ash rushed to my side as the huge arachnid skittered away, over Tom's face and up a wall. Ash drew his sword, but Puck gave a shout and hurled a rock at it. The stone hit the

spider dead on; with a flash of sparks the bug plummeted to the ground, landing with a metallic clink on the flagstones.

We approached cautiously, Ash with his sword drawn, Puck with a good-size rock. But the insect thing lay broken and motionless on the ground, almost smashed in two. Up close, it looked less spidery and more like those face-hugger things from *Aliens*, except it was made of metal. Gingerly, I picked it up by its whiplike tail.

"What *is* that?" Ash muttered. For once, the unflappable fey sounded almost…terrified. "Another of Machina's iron fey?"

Something clicked in my head. "It's a bug," I whispered. The boys gave me puzzled frowns, and I plunged on. "Ironhorse, gremlins, bugs—it's starting to make sense to me now." I whirled on Puck, who blinked and stepped back. "Puck, didn't you tell me once that the fey were born from the dreams of mortals?"

"Yeah?" Puck said, not getting it.

"Well, what if these things—" I jiggled the metal insect "—are born from different dreams? Dreams of technology, and progress? Dreams of science? What if the pursuit of ideas that once seemed impossible—flight, steam engines, the Worldwide Web—gave birth to a whole different species of faery? Mankind has made huge leaps in technology over the past hundred years. And with each success, we've kept reaching—dreaming—for more. These iron fey could be the result."

Puck blanched, and Ash looked incredibly disturbed. "If that's true," he murmured, his gray eyes darkening like thunderclouds, "then all fey could be in danger. Not just the Seelie and Unseelie Courts. The Nevernever itself would be affected, the entire fey world."

Puck nodded, looking more serious than I'd ever seen. "This is a war," he said, locking gazes with Ash. "If the Iron King is killing the guardians of the trods, he must be planning to invade. We have to find Machina and destroy him. Perhaps he's the heart of these iron fey. If we kill him, his followers could scatter."

"I agree." Ash sheathed his sword, giving the bug a revolted look. "We will bring Meghan to the Iron Court and rescue her brother by killing the ruler of the iron fey."

"Bravo," said Grimalkin, peering down from Cold Tom's chest. "The Winter prince and Oberon's jester agreeing on something. The world must be ending."

We all glared at him. The cat sneezed a laugh and hopped down from the body, gazing up at the bug in my hand. He wrinkled his nose.

"Interesting," he mused. "That thing stinks of iron and steel, and yet it does not burn you. I suppose being half-human has perks, after all."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Mmm. Toss it to Ash, would you?"

"No!" Ash stepped back, his hand going to his sword. Grimalkin smiled.

"You see? Even the mighty Winter prince cannot stand the touch of iron. You, on the other hand, can handle it with no ill effects. Now do you see why the courts are scrambling to find you? Think of what Mab could do if she had you under her control."

I dropped the bug with a shudder. "Is that why Mab wants me?" I asked Ash, who still stood a few feet away. "As a weapon?"

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Grimalkin purred. "She cannot even use glamour. She would be a horrible assassin."

"I don't know why Mab wants you," Ash said slowly, meeting my eyes. "I don't question the orders of my queen. I only obey."

"It doesn't matter now," Puck broke in, stabbing a glare at the Winter prince. "First, we have to find Machina and take him out. Then we'll decide matters from there." His voice hinted that the matters he spoke of would be decided with a fight.

Ash looked like he wanted to say something else, but he nodded. Grimalkin yawned noisily and trotted toward the gate.

"Human, do not leave the bug here when we leave," he called without looking back. "It might corrupt the land around it. You can dump it in your world and it will not make any difference."

Tail waving, he trotted beneath the pillar and disappeared. Pinching the bug between thumb and forefinger, I stuffed it into my backpack. With Ash and Puck flanking me like wary guard dogs, I stepped under the pillars and everything went white.

* * *

AS THE BRIGHTNESS FADED, I gazed around, first in confusion, then in horror. I stood in the middle of an open mouth, with blunt teeth lining either side

and a red tongue below my feet. I squawked in terror and leaped out, tripping over the bottom lip and sprawling flat on my stomach.

Twisting around, I saw Ash and Puck step through the gaping maw of a cartoonish blue whale. Sitting atop the whale statue, smiling and pointing off into the distance, was Pinocchio, his wooden features frozen in plaster and fiberglass.

"'Scuse me, lady!" A little girl in pink overalls stepped over me to rush into the whale's mouth, followed by her two friends. Ash and Puck stepped aside, and the kids paid them no attention as they screamed and cavorted inside the whale's jaws.

"Interesting place," Puck mused as he pulled me to my feet. I didn't answer, too busy gaping at our surroundings. It seemed we had stepped into the middle of a fantasyland. A giant pink shoe sat a few yards away, and a bright blue castle lay beyond, with kids swarming over both of them. Between park benches and shady trees, a pirate ship hosted a mob of miniature swashbucklers, and a magnificent green dragon reared on its hind legs, breathing plastic fire. The flame shooting from its mouth was an actual slide. I watched a small boy clamber up the steps of the dragon's back and zip down the slide, hollering with delight, and smiled sadly.

Ethan would love this place, I thought, watching the boy dart off toward a pumpkin coach. *Maybe, when this is all over, I'll bring him here.*

"Let us go," Grimalkin said, leaping onto a giant pink mushroom. The cat's tail bristled, and his eyes darted about. "The oracle is not far, but we should hurry."

"Why so nervous, Grim?" Puck drawled, gazing around the park. "I think we should stay for a bit, soak up the atmosphere." He grinned and waved at a small girl peeking at him from behind a cottage, and she ducked out of sight.

"Too many kids here," Grimalkin said, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "Too much imagination. They can see us, you know. As we really are. And unlike the hob over there, I do not relish the attention."

I followed his gaze and saw a short faery playing on the shoe with several children. He had curly brown hair, a battered trench coat, and furry ears poking from the sides of his head. He laughed and chased the kids around him, and the parents sitting on the benches didn't seem to notice.

A boy of about three saw us and approached, his eyes on Grimalkin. "Kitty, kitty," he crooned, holding out both hands. Grimalkin flattened his

ears and hissed, baring his teeth, and the boy recoiled. “Beat it, kid,” he spat, and the boy burst into tears, running toward a couple on a bench. They frowned at their son’s wailing about a mean kitty, and glanced up at us.

“Right, time to go,” Puck said, striding away. We followed, with Grimalkin taking the lead. We left Storyland, as it was called on a sign by the exit, through a gate guarded by Humpty Dumpty and Little Bo Peep, and walked through a park filled with truly giant oak trees draped in moss and vines. I caught faces peering at us from the trunks, women with beady black eyes. Puck blew kisses at a few of them, and Ash bowed his head respectfully as we passed. Even Grimalkin nodded to the faces in the trees, making me wonder why they were so important.

After nearly an hour of walking, we reached the city streets.

I paused and gazed around, wishing we had more time to explore. I’d always wanted to go to New Orleans, particularly during Mardi Gras, though I knew Mom would never permit it. Even now, New Orleans pulsed with life and activity. Rustic shops and buildings lined the street, many stacked two or three stories atop one another, with railings and verandas overlooking the sidewalk. Strains of jazz music drifted into the street, and the spicy smell of Cajun food made my stomach growl.

“Gawk later.” Grimalkin poked me in the shin with a claw. “We are not here to sightsee. We have to get to the French Quarter. One of you, find us some transportation.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Ash questioned as Puck flagged down a carriage pulled by a sleepy-looking red mule. The mule snorted and pinned his ears as we piled inside, but the driver smiled and nodded. Grimalkin leaped onto the front seat.

“The Historic Voodoo Museum,” he told the driver, who didn’t look at all fazed by a talking cat. “And step on it.”

* * *

VOODOO MUSEUM? I WASN’T sure what to expect when the carriage pulled up to a shabby-looking building in the French Quarter. A pair of simple black doors stood beneath the overhang, and a humble wooden sign proclaimed it the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum. Dusk had fallen, and the sign in the grimy window read Closed. Grimalkin nodded to Puck,

who muttered a few words under his breath and tapped on the door. It opened with a soft creak, and we stepped inside.

The inside was musty and warm. I tripped over a bump in the carpet and stumbled into Ash, who steadied me with a sigh. Puck closed the door behind us, plunging the room into blackness. I groped for the wall, but Ash spoke a quick word, and a globe of blue fire appeared over his head, illuminating the darkness.

The pale light washed over a grisly collection of horror. A skeleton in a top hat stood along the far wall beside a mannequin with an alligator head. Skulls of humans and animals decorated the room, along with grinning masks and numerous wooden dolls. Glass cases bore jars of snakes and frogs floating in amber liquid, teeth, pestles, drums, turtle shells, and other oddities.

"This way," came Grimalkin's voice, unnaturally loud in the looming silence. We trailed him down a dark hall, where portraits of men and women stared at us from the walls. I felt eyes following me as I ducked into a room cluttered with more grisly paraphernalia and a round table in the center covered with a black tablecloth. Four chairs stood around it, as if someone were expecting us.

As we approached the table, one of the desiccated faces in the corner stirred and floated away from the wall. I screamed and leaped behind Puck as a skeletal woman with tangled white hair shambled toward us, her eyes hollow pits in a withered face.

"Hello, children," the hag whispered, her voice like sand hissing through a pipe. "Come to visit old Anna, have you? Puck is here, and Grimalkin, as well. What a pleasure." She gestured to the table, and the nails on her knobby hands glinted like steel. "Please, have a seat."

We sat down around the table as the hag came to stand before us. She smelled of dust and decay, of old newspapers that had been left in the attic for years. She smiled at me, revealing yellow, needlelike teeth.

"I smell need," she rasped, sinking into a chair. "Need, and desire. You, child." She crooked a finger at me. "You have come seeking knowledge. You search for something that must be found, yes?"

"Yes," I whispered.

The hag nodded her withered head. "Ask, then, child of two worlds. But remember…" She fixed me with a hollow glare. "All knowledge must

be paid for. I will give you the answers you seek, but I desire something in return. Will you accept the price?"

Defeat crushed me. More faery bargains. More prices to pay. I was so much in debt already, I would never see the end of it. "I don't have much left to give," I told her. She laughed, a sibilant hissing sound.

"There is always something, dear child. So far, only your freedom has been claimed by another." She sniffed, as a dog might when catching a scent. "You still have your youth, your talents, your voice. Your future child. All these are of interest to me."

"You're not getting my future child," I said automatically.

"Really?" The oracle tapped her fingers together. "You will not give it up, even though it will bring you nothing but grief?"

"Enough." Ash's strong voice broke through the darkness. "We're not here to debate the what-ifs of the future. Name your price, oracle, and let the girl decide if she wants to pay it."

The oracle sniffed and settled back. "A memory," she stated.

"A what?"

"A memory," the hag said again. "One that you recall with great affection. The happiest memory of your childhood. I've precious few of my own, you see."

"Really?" I asked. "That's it? You just want one of my memories, and we have a deal?"

"Meghan—" Puck broke in "—don't take this so lightly. Your memories are a part of you. Losing one of your memories is like losing a piece of your soul."

That sounded a bit more ominous. *Still,* I thought, *one memory is a lot easier to pay than my voice, or my firstborn child. And it's not like I'll miss it, especially if I can't remember.* I thought about the happiest moments in my life: birthday parties, my first bike, Beau as a puppy. None of them seemed important enough to keep. "All right," I told the oracle, and took a seat across from her. "You're on. You get one memory of mine, one, and then you tell me what I want to know. Deal?"

The hag bared her teeth in a smile. "Yesssssssss."

She rose up over the table, framing my face with both her claws. I shivered and closed my eyes as her nails gently scratched my cheeks.

"This might feel a bit…unpleasant," the oracle hissed, and I gasped as she sank her claws into my mind, ripping it open like a paper sack. I felt

her shuffling through my head, sorting through memories like photographs, examining them before tossing them aside. Discarded images fluttered around me: memories, emotions, and old wounds rose up again, fresh and painful. I wanted to pull back, to make it stop, but I couldn't move. Finally, the oracle paused, reaching toward a bright spot of happiness, and in horror I saw what she was going for.

No! I wanted to scream. *No, not that one! Leave it alone, please!*

"Yesssssss," the oracle hissed, sinking her claws into the memory. "I will take this one. Now it is mine."

There was a ripping sensation, and a bolt of pain through my head. I stiffened, my jaw locking around a shriek, and slumped in my chair, feeling like my head had been split open.

I sat up, wincing at the throbbing in my skull. The oracle watched me over the tablecloth, a pleased smile on her face. Puck was murmuring something that I couldn't make out, and Ash regarded me with a look of pity. I felt tired, drained, and empty for some reason, like there was a gaping hole deep inside me.

Hesitantly, I probed my memories, wondering which one the oracle took. After a moment, I realized how absurd that was.

"It is done," the oracle murmured. She lay her hands, palms up, on the table between us. "And now I will uphold my end of the bargain. Place your hands in mine, child, and ask."

Swallowing my revulsion, I put my palms gently over hers, shivering as those long nails curled around my fingers. The hag closed her pitted eyes. "Three questions," she rasped, her voice seeming to come from a great distance away. "That is the standard bargain. Three questions will I answer, and I am done. Choose wisely."

I took a deep breath, glanced at Puck and Ash, and whispered: "Where can I find my brother?"

Silence for a moment. The hag's eyes opened, and I jumped. They were no longer hollow, but burned with flame, as black and depthless as the void. Her mouth opened, stretching impossibly wide, as she breathed:

Within the iron mountain
a stolen child waits.
A king no longer on his throne
shall guide you past the gates.

“Oh, fabulous,” Puck muttered, sitting back in his chair and rolling his eyes. “I love riddles. And they rhyme so nicely. Ask her where we can find the Iron King.”

I nodded. “Where is Machina, the Iron King?”

The oracle sighed, voices erupting from her throat to whisper:

In Blight’s heart
a tower sings
upon whose thrones
sit Iron Kings.

“Blight.” Puck nodded, arching his eyebrows. “And singing towers. Well, this gets better and better. I’m sure glad we decided to come here. Prince, can you think of anything you want to ask our most obliging oracle?”

Ash, deep in thought with his chin in his hands, raised his head. His eyes narrowed. “Ask her how we can kill him,” he demanded.

I squirmed, uncomfortable with the thought of having to kill. I only wanted to rescue Ethan. I didn’t know how this turned into a holy war. “Ash—”

“Just do it.”

I swallowed and turned back to the oracle. “How do we kill the Iron King?” I whispered reluctantly. The oracle’s mouth opened.

The King of Iron cannot be slain
by mortal man or fey.
Seek out the Keepers of the trees.
Their hearts will show the way.

No sooner were the last words out of her mouth than the oracle collapsed on the table. For a moment she lay there, a desiccated old woman, and then she just…disintegrated. Dust flew everywhere, stinging my eyes and throat. I turned away, coughing and hacking, and when I could breathe again, the oracle was gone. Only a few floating dust motes showed she had been there at all.

“I believe,” Grimalkin said, peering over the table rim, “that our audience is over.”

* * *

“SO WHERE TO NOW?” I asked as we left the Voodoo Museum, stepping into the dimly lit streets of the French Quarter. “The oracle didn’t give us much to go on.”

“On the contrary,” Grimalkin said, looking back at me, “she gave us a great deal. One, we know your brother is with Machina. That was a given, but confirmation is always beneficial. Two, we know Machina is supposedly invincible, and his lair is in the middle of a blighted land. And, most important, three, we know there is someone who knows how to kill him.”

“Yeah, but who?” I rubbed a hand over my eyes. I was so tired—tired of searching, tired of running in circles with no answers to anything. I wanted it all to end.

“Really, human, were you not listening?” Grimalkin sighed, exasperated again, but I didn’t care. “It was not even much of a riddle, really. What about you two?” he asked, looking to the boys. “Did our mighty protectors glean any bits of knowledge, or was I the only one paying attention?”

Ash didn’t reply, too busy staring down the street, eyes narrowed. Puck shrugged. “Seek out the Keepers of the trees,” he muttered. “That’s easy enough. I assume we should go back to the park.”

“Very good, Goodfellow.”

“I try.”

“I’m so lost,” I groaned, sitting down on the curb. “Why are we going back to the park? We just came from there. There are other trees in New Orleans.”

“Because, princess—”

“Explain later.” Ash appeared beside me. His voice was low and harsh. “We need to go. Now.”

“Why?” I asked, just as the streetlamps—and every artificial light on the block—sputtered and went out.

Faery lights glowed overhead as both Ash and Puck called them into existence. Footsteps echoed in the shadows, getting closer, coming from

all directions. Grimalkin muttered something and disappeared. Puck and Ash stepped back to flank me, their eyes scanning the darkness.

Beyond the ring of light, dark shapes shuffled toward us. As they came into the light, the faery fire washed over the faces of humans—normal men and women—their features blank as they lurched forward. Most of them carried weapons: iron pipes and metal baseball bats and knives. Every zombie movie I'd ever seen sprang to mind, and I pressed close to Ash, feeling the muscles coil under his skin.

"Humans," Ash muttered, his hand dropping to his sword. "What are they doing? They shouldn't be able to see us."

A dark chuckle rose from the ranks shambling toward us, and the mob abruptly stopped. They moved aside as a woman floated between them, hands on her slender hips. She wore a business suit of poison green, three-inch heels, and green lipstick that glowed with radioactive brightness. Her hair appeared to be made of wires, thin network cables of various color: greens, blacks, and reds.

"Here you are at last." Her voice buzzed, like millions of bees given speech. "I'm shocked that Ironhorse had such a problem with you, but then again, he's so *old*. Past his usefulness, I'd say. You will not have such an easy time with me."

"Who are you?" growled Ash. Puck moved beside him, and together they formed a living shield in front of me. The lady giggled, like a mosquito humming in your ear, and held out a green-nailed hand.

"I am Virus, second of King Machina's lieutenants." She blew me a kiss that made my skin crawl. "Pleased to meet you, Meghan Chase."

"What have you done to these people?" I demanded.

"Oh, don't worry about them." Virus twirled in place, smiling. "They've just caught a little bug. These little bugs, to be exact." She held up her hand, and a tiny insect swarm flew out of her sleeve to hover over her palm, like sparkling silver dust. "Cute little things, aren't they? Quite harmless, but they allow me to get inside a brain and rewrite its programming. Allow me to demonstrate." She gestured to the nearest human, and the man dropped to all fours and started to bark. Virus tittered, clapping her hands. "See? Now he thinks he's a dog."

"Brilliant," Puck said. "Can you make him crow like a rooster, too?"

Ash and I glared at him. He blinked. "What?"

I started, a memory dropping into place, and spun back on Virus. “You…you’re the one who set the chimera loose on Elysium!”

“Why, yes, that was my work.” Virus looked pleased, though her face fell a moment later. “Although, as an experiment, it didn’t quite work out as I’d hoped. The normal fey don’t react well to my bugs. That whole aversion-to-iron thing, you know. It drove the stupid beast mad, and probably would have killed it, if it hadn’t been sliced to pieces. Mortals, though!” She pirouetted in the air, flinging out her arms, as if to embrace the crowd. “They make wonderful drones. So devoted to their computers and technology, they were slaves to it long before I came along.”

“Let them go,” I told her.

Virus regarded me with glittering green eyes. “I don’t think so, dearie.” She snapped her fingers, and the mob shambled forward again, arms reaching. “Bring me the girl,” she ordered as the circle tightened around us. “Kill the rest.”

Ash drew his sword.

“No!” I cried, grabbing his arm. “Don’t hurt them. They’re just ordinary humans. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

Ash shot me a wild glare over his shoulder. “Then what do you want me to do?”

“I suggest we run,” Puck offered, taking something from his pocket. He tossed it at the crowd, and it exploded into a log, pinning two startled zombie men to the ground, creating a hole in the ring surrounding us.

“Let’s go!” Puck yelled, and we didn’t need encouraging. We leaped over the thrashing bodies, dodging the pipes they swung at us, and tore down the street.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Dryad of City Park

Pounding footsteps told us we were being followed. A twirling pipe flew over my shoulder, smashing the window of a shop. I yelped and almost fell, but Ash grabbed my hand and hauled me upright.

“This is ridiculous,” I heard him growl, pulling me along. “Running from a mob, a human mob. I could take them out with one sweep of my hand.”

“Perhaps you didn’t see the copious amounts of iron they’re carrying,” Puck said, wincing as a knife hurled past him, skidding into the street. “Of course, if you want to make a suicide stand, I certainly won’t stop you. Though, I’d be disappointed you wouldn’t be there for our last duel.”

“Scared, Goodfellow?”

“In your dreams, princeling.”

I couldn’t believe they were bantering while we were running for our lives. I wanted to tell them to knock it off, when a pipe hurled through the air, striking Puck in the shoulder. He gasped and staggered, barely catching himself in time, and I cried out in fear.

Buzzing laughter echoed behind us. I turned my head to see Virus floating above the crowd, her bugs swirling around her like a diamond blizzard. “You can run, little faery boys, but you can’t hide,” she called. “There are humans everywhere, and all can be my puppets. If you stop now and hand over the girl, I’ll even let you choose how you want to die.”

Ash snarled. Pushing me on, he spun and hurled a spray of ice shards at the woman overhead. She gasped, and a zombie leaped into the air to block the attack, the shards tearing through his chest. He collapsed, twitching, and Virus hissed like a furious wasp.

“Oh, nice going, prince,” Puck called as the zombies lurched forward with angry cries. “Way to piss her off.”

“You killed him!” I stared at Ash, horrified. “You just killed a person, and it wasn’t even his fault!”

“There are casualties in every war,” Ash replied coldly, pulling me around a corner. “He would have killed us if he could. One less soldier to worry about.”

“This isn’t a war!” I screamed at him. “And it’s different when the humans don’t even know what’s happening. They’re only after us because some crazy faery is screwing with their heads!”

“Either way, we’d still be dead.”

“No more killing,” I snarled, wishing we could stop so I could look at him straight. “Do you hear me, Ash? Find another way to stop them. You don’t have to kill.”

He glared at me out of the corner of his eye, then sighed with irritation. “As you wish, princess. Though you might regret it before the night is out.”

We burst into a brightly lit square with a marble fountain in the center. People wandered down the sidewalks, and I relaxed a bit. Surely, Virus wouldn’t attack us here, in front of all these eyewitnesses. Faeries could blend in or go invisible, but humans, especially mobs of humans, had no such power.

Ash slowed, catching my hand and drawing me beside him. “Walk,” he murmured, tugging my arm to slow me down. “Don’t run, it’ll attract their attention.”

The crowd chasing us broke apart at the edge of the street, wandering around as if they had always meant to do so. My heart pounded, but I forced myself to walk, holding on to Ash’s hand as if we were out for a stroll.

Virus floated into the square, her bugs swarming out in all directions, and my nervousness increased. I spotted a policeman leaning beside his squad car and broke away from Ash, sprinting up to him.

Virus’s laughter cut through the night. “I see you,” she called, just as I reached the officer.

“Excuse me, sir!” I gasped as the policeman turned to me. “Could you help me? There’s a gang chasing—”

I stumbled back in horror. The officer regarded me blankly, his jaw hanging slack, his eyes empty of reason. He lunged and grabbed my arm, and I yelped, kicking him in the shin. It didn’t faze him, and he grabbed my other wrist.

The pedestrians in the square lurched toward us with renewed vigor. I snarled a curse and lashed out at the policeman, driving my knee into his groin. He winced and struck me across the face, making my head spin. The mob closed in, clawing at my hair and clothes.

And Ash was there, smashing his hilt into the policeman's jaw, knocking him back. Puck grabbed me and leaped over the police car, dragging me over the hood. We broke free of the mob and ran, Virus's laughter following us into the street.

"There!" Grimalkin appeared beside us, his tail fluffed out and his eyes wild. "Dead ahead! A carriage. Use it, quickly."

I looked across the street and saw an unattended horse and open-top buggy, waiting on the curb to pick up passengers. It wasn't a getaway car, but it was better than nothing. We crossed the street and ran toward the carriage.

A gunshot rang out behind us.

Puck jerked weirdly and fell, collapsing to the pavement with a howl of agony. I screamed, and Ash immediately hauled him upright, forcing him to move. They staggered across the street, Ash dragging Puck with him, as another shot shattered the night. The horse whinnied and half reared at the noise, rolling its eyes. I grabbed its bridle before the beast fled in terror. Behind me, walking toward us with that zombielike shuffle, I saw the police officer, one arm extended, pointing his revolver at us.

Ash shouldered Puck into the carriage and jumped into the driver's seat, Grimalkin bounding up beside him. I scrambled inside and crouched beside Puck, sprawled on the floor of the carriage, gasping. Horrified, I watched dark blood blossom around his ribs, seeping over the floorboards.

"Hold on!" Ash yelled, and brought the reins down on the horse's flanks with a loud "Hiya!" The horse leaped forward with a squeal. We galloped through a red light, barely dodging a honking taxi. Cars blared, people shouted and cursed, and the sounds of pursuit faded behind us.

"Ash!" I cried a few minutes later. "Puck's not moving!"

Preoccupied with driving the carriage, Ash barely looked back, but Grimalkin leaped to the floor and trotted up to the body. Puck's face was the color of eggshells, his skin cool and clammy. I'd tried to stanch the bleeding using a sleeve of his hoodie, but there was so much blood. My best friend was dying, and I couldn't do anything to help.

"He needs a doctor," I called up to Ash. "We need to find a hospital—"

“No,” Grimalkin interrupted. “Think, human! No faery would survive a hospital. With all those sharp metal instruments, he would be dead before the night was out.”

“Then what can we do?” I cried, on the verge of hysteria.

Grimalkin jumped up beside Ash again. “The park,” he said calmly. “We take him to the park. The dryads should be able to help him.”

“*Should?* What if they can’t?”

“Then, human, I would start praying for a miracle.”

* * *

ASH DIDN’T STOP AT THE EDGE of the park, but instead drove the carriage over the curb and into the grass beneath the trees. Worried for Puck, I didn’t notice we’d stopped until the prince knelt beside me, swung Puck onto a shoulder, and dropped down. Numbly, I followed.

We’d stopped under the boughs of two enormous oaks, their gnarled branches completely shutting out the night sky. Ash carried Puck beneath the twisted giants and eased him down to the grass.

And we waited.

Two figures stepped out of the tree trunks, materializing into view. They were both slender women, with moss-green hair and skin like polished mahogany. Beetle-black eyes peered out as the dryads stepped forward, the smell of fresh earth and bark thick in the air. Grimalkin and Ash nodded respectfully, but I was too worried to catch the movement in time.

“We know why you have come,” one dryad said, her voice the sigh of wind through the leaves. “The breeze carries whispers to us, news of faraway places. We know of your plight with the Iron King. We have been waiting for you, child of two worlds.”

“Please,” I asked, stepping forward, “can you help Puck? He was shot on the way here. I’ll bargain with you, give you anything you want, if you can save him.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ash shoot me a dark glare, but I ignored it.

“We will not bargain with you, child,” the second dryad murmured, and I felt a sinking despair. “It is not our way. We are not like the sidhe or

the cait sith, seeking endless ways to empower themselves. We simply are."

"As a favor, then," I pleaded, refusing to give up. "Please, he'll die if you don't help him."

"Death is a part of life." The dryad regarded me with pitiless black eyes. "All things fade eventually, even one as long-lived as Puck. People will forget his stories, forget he ever was, and he will cease to be. It is the way of things."

I fought the urge to scream. The dryads wouldn't help; they'd just doomed Puck to die. Clenching my fists, I glared at the tree women, wanting to shake them, throttle them until they agreed to help. I felt a rush of…something…and the trees above me groaned and shook, showering us with leaves. Ash and Grimalkin took a step back, and the dryads exchanged glances.

"She is strong," one whispered.

"Her power sleeps," the other replied. "The trees hear her, the earth answers her call."

"Perhaps it will be enough."

They nodded again, and one of them lifted Puck around the waist, dragging him toward her tree. They both melted into the bark and disappeared. I jerked in alarm.

"What are you doing?"

"Do not worry," the remaining dryad said, turning back to me. "We cannot heal him, but we can halt the damage. Puck will sleep until he is well enough to rejoin you. Whether that takes a night or several years will be entirely up to him."

She tilted her head at me, shedding moss. "You and your companions may stay here tonight. It is safe. Within these boundaries, the iron fey will not venture. Our power over tree and land keeps them out. Rest, and we will call for you when it is time."

With that, she melted back into the tree, leaving us alone, with one less companion than when we started out.

* * *

I WANTED TO SLEEP. I wanted to lie down and black out, and wake up to a world where best friends were never shot and little brothers never

kidnapped. I wanted everything to be over and my life to go back to normal.

But, as exhausted as I was, I couldn't sleep. I wandered the park in a daze, numb to everything. Ash was off speaking with the resident park fey, and Grimalkin had disappeared, so I was alone. In the scattered moonlight, faeries danced and sang and laughed, calling out to me from a distance. Satyrs whistled tunes on their pipes, piskies buzzed through the air on gossamer wings, and willowy dryads danced through the trees, their slender bodies waving like grass in the wind. I ignored them all.

At the edge of a pond, under the drooping limbs of another giant oak, I sank down, pulled my knees to my chest, and sobbed.

Mermaids broke the surface of the pond to stare at me, and a ring of piskies gathered round, tiny lights hovering in confusion. I barely saw them. The constant worry for Ethan, the fear of losing Puck, and the ill-fated promise to Ash were too much for me. I cried until I was gasping for breath, hiccuping so hard my lungs ached.

But, of course, the fey couldn't let me be miserable in peace. As my tears slowed, I became aware I wasn't alone. A herd of satyrs surrounded me, their eyes bright in the gloom.

"Pretty flower," one of them said, stepping forward. He had a dark face, a goatee, and horns curling through his thick black hair. His voice was low and soft, and had a faint Creole accent. "Why so sad, lovely one? Come with me, and we will make you laugh again."

I shivered and rose shakily to my feet. "No, thank y—No. I'm fine. I just want to be alone for a while."

"Alone is a terrible thing to be," the satyr said, moving closer. He smiled, charming and attractive. Glamour shimmered around him, and I saw his mortal guise for a split second: a handsome college boy, out walking with his friends. "Why don't we get some coffee, and you can tell me all about it?"

He sounded so sincere, I almost believed him. Then I caught the glint of raw lust in his eyes, in the eyes of his friends, and my stomach contracted in fear.

"I really have to go," I said, backing away. They followed me, their gazes hungry and intense. I smelled something strong in the air and realized it was musk. "Please, please leave me alone."

"You'll thank us afterward," the satyr promised, and lunged.

I ran.

The herd pursued me, whooping and shouting promises: that I would enjoy it, that I needed to loosen up a bit. They were much faster, and the lead goat grabbed me from behind, arms around my waist. I screamed as he lifted me off my feet, kicking and flailing. The other satyrs closed in, grabbing and pawing, tearing at my clothes.

A rush of power, the same I'd felt earlier, and suddenly the oak above us moved. With a deafening creak, a gnarled branch as thick as my waist swung down and struck the lead satyr in the head. He dropped me and staggered back, and the limb swung back to hit him again in the stomach, knocking him sprawling. The other satyrs backed away.

Goat-boy got his feet under him and stood, glaring at me. "I see you like it a little rough," he wheezed, brushing himself off. Shaking his head, he ran a tongue over his lips and stepped forward. "That's okay, we can do rough, right, boys?"

"So can I." A dark shape glided out of the trees, a portion of shadow come to life. The satyrs blinked and hastily stepped back as Ash strode into the middle of the herd. Looming up behind me, he slid an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to his chest. My heart sped up, and my stomach did a backflip. "This one," Ash growled, "is off-limits."

"Prince Ash?" gasped the lead satyr, as the rest of the herd bowed their heads. He paled and held up his hands. "Sorry, Your Highness, I didn't know she was yours. My apologies. No harm done, okay?"

"No one touches her," Ash said, his voice coated with frost. "Touch her, and I'll freeze your testicles and put them in a jar. Understand?"

The satyrs cringed. Stammering apologies to both Ash and me, they bowed and scurried away. Ash shot a glare at two piskies hovering nearby to watch, and they sped into the trees with high-pitched giggles. Silence fell, and we were alone.

"Are you all right?" Ash murmured, releasing me. "Did they hurt you?"

I was shaking. That exhilarating rush of power was gone; now I felt completely drained. "No," I whispered, moving away. "I'm all right." I might've cried, but I had no more tears left in me. My knees trembled and I stumbled, putting a hand against a tree to steady myself.

Ash moved closer. Catching my wrist, he gently pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight. I was startled, but only for

a moment. Sniffling, I closed my eyes and buried my face in his chest, letting all the fear and anger seep away under his touch. I heard his rapid heartbeat, and felt the chill prickling my skin through his shirt. Strangely, it wasn't uncomfortable at all.

We stood like that for a long moment. Ash didn't speak, didn't ask questions, didn't do anything but hold me. I sighed and relaxed into him, and for a little while, everything was okay. Ethan and Puck still lingered in the back of my mind, but for now, this was good. This was enough.

Then I made a stupid mistake and looked up at him.

His eyes met mine, and for a moment, his face was open and vulnerable in the moonlight. I caught a hint of wonder there as we stared at each other. Slowly, he leaned forward. I caught my breath, a tiny gasp escaping.

He stiffened, and his expression shuttered closed, eyes going hard and frosty.

Pushing me away, he stepped back, and my heart sank. Ash looked into the trees, the shadows, the pond, anywhere but at me. Wanting to reclaim that lost moment, I reached for him, but he slid away.

"This is getting old," he said in a voice that matched his eyes. He crossed his arms and stepped away, putting even more distance between us. "I'm not here to play nursemaid, princess. Perhaps you shouldn't go wandering about on your own. I wouldn't want you damaged before you ever reached the Unseelie Court."

My cheeks burned, and I clenched my fists. The memory of being humiliated in the cafeteria, so long ago, rose to my mind to taunt me. "That's all I am to you, isn't it?" I snarled at him. "Your chance to gain favor from your queen. That's all you care about."

"Yes," he replied calmly, infuriating me even more. "I've never pretended anything else. You knew my motivations from the beginning."

Angry tears stung my eyes. I thought I was all cried out, but I was wrong. "Bastard," I hissed. "Puck was right about you."

He smiled coldly. "Maybe you should ask Puck why I've vowed to kill him someday," he said, eyes glinting. "See if he has the courage to tell you that bit of history between us." He smirked and crossed his arms. "That is, if he ever wakes up."

I opened my mouth to reply, but with a rustle of leaves, two dryads melted out of a nearby trunk. Ash faded into the darkness as they

approached, leaving me with my angry words unsaid. I fisted my hands, wanting to smack the arrogance right off his perfect face. I turned and kicked a log instead.

The dryads bowed to me, unconcerned with my mild temper tantrum.

"Meghan Chase, the Elder will see you now."

* * *

I FOLLOWED THEM TO THE BASE of a single oak tree, its branches so draped in moss, it looked like it was hung with moldy curtains. Ash and Grimalkin were already there, though Ash didn't even look my way as I approached. I glared at him, but he continued to ignore me. With the cat on one side and the Winter prince flanking the other, I stepped beneath the boughs of the huge oak and waited.

The bark rippled, and an ancient woman stepped out of the tree. Her skin flaked, like wrinkled bark, and her long hair was the brownish-green of old moss. She was stooped and bent, covered in a robe of lichens that shivered with thousands of insects and spiders. Her face resembled a walnut, lined and wrinkled, and when she moved, her joints creaked like branches in the wind. But her beady eyes were sharp and clear as she looked me over and beckoned with one gnarled, twiggy hand.

"Come closer, child," she whispered, her voice rustling like dry leaves. I swallowed and moved forward, until I could see the insects boring into her skin, smell the earthy scent of her. "Yes, you are the daughter of Oberon, the one whom the wind whispers about. I know why you are here. You seek the one called the Iron King, yes? You wish to find the entrance into his realm."

"Yes," I murmured. "I'm looking for my brother. Machina kidnapped him, and I'm going to get him back."

"As you are, you will not be able to save him," the Elder told me, and my stomach dropped to my toes. "The Iron King waits for you in his lair of steel. He knows you are coming, and you will not be able to stop him. No weapon forged by mortal or fey can harm the Iron King. He fears nothing."

Ash stepped forward, bowing his head respectfully. "Elder," he murmured, "we were told you might know the secret to slaying the Iron King."

The ancient dryad regarded him solemnly. “Yes, young prince,” she whispered. “You heard true. There is a way to kill Machina and end his reign. You need a special weapon, one that cannot be forged with tools, something as natural as a flower growing in the sunlight.”

Ash leaned forward eagerly. “Where can we find this weapon?”

The Elder Dryad sighed, and seemed to shrink in on herself. “Here,” she murmured, looking back at the great oak, her voice tinged with sadness. “The weapon you require is Witchwood, from the heart of the most ancient of trees, as deadly to Machina as iron is to normal fey. A living wood containing the spirit of nature and the power of the natural earth—a bane to the faeries of progress and technology. Without it, you cannot hope to defeat him and save the human child.”

Ash fell silent, his face grim. Bewildered, I looked to him, then back at the Elder Dryad. “You’ll give it to us, won’t you?” I asked. “If it’s the only way to save Ethan—”

“Meghan,” Grimalkin murmured from the grass, “you do not know what you are asking. Witchwood is the heart of the Elder’s tree. Without it, the oak will die, and so will the dryad connected to it.”

Dismayed, I looked at the Elder Dryad, whose lips curled in a faint smile. “It’s true,” she whispered. “Without its heart, the tree will slowly wither and die. And yet, I knew what you came for, Meghan Chase. I planned to offer it from the beginning.”

“No,” I said automatically. “I don’t want it. Not like this. There has to be another way.”

“There is no other way, child.” The Elder shook her head at me. “And if you do not defeat the Iron King, we will perish all the same. His influence grows. The stronger he becomes, the more the Nevernever fades. Eventually we will all wither and die in a wasteland of logic and science.”

“But I can’t kill him,” I protested. “I’m not a warrior. I just want Ethan back, that’s all.”

“You won’t have to worry about that.” The dryad nodded to Ash, standing silently nearby. “The Winter prince can fight for you, I imagine. He smells of blood and sorrow. I will happily grant the Witchwood to him.”

“Please.” I looked at her, pleading, wanting her to understand. Puck had already possibly given his life for my quest; I didn’t want another’s

death on my hands. “I don’t want you to do this. It’s too much. You shouldn’t have to die for me.”

“I give my life for all fey,” the dryad replied solemnly. “You will simply be my instrument of salvation. Besides, death comes for us all, in the end. I have lived a long life, longer than most. I have no regrets.”

She smiled at me, an old, grandmotherly smile, and faded back into her oak. Ash, Grim, and the other dryads stood silently, their expressions somber and grave. A moment later, the Elder reemerged, clutching something in her withered hands—a long, straight stick, so pale it was almost white, with reddish veins running down its length. When she stepped up and offered it to me, seconds passed before I could take it. It was warm and smooth in my hands, pulsing with a life of its own, and I almost hurled it away.

The Elder placed a withered, knobby hand on my arm. “One more thing, child,” she added as I struggled with holding the living wood. “You are powerful, much more so than you realize. Oberon’s blood flows through your veins, and the Nevernever itself responds to your whims. Your talent still sleeps within you, but it is beginning to stir. How you use it will shape the future of the courts, the fey, your own destiny, everything.

“Now,” she continued, sounding weaker than before, “go and rescue your brother. The trod to Machina’s realm is an abandoned factory down by the wharfs. A guide will lead you there tomorrow. Kill the Iron King and bring peace to both our worlds.”

“What if I can’t?” I whispered. “What if the Iron King truly is invincible?”

“Then we will all die,” said the Elder Dryad, and faded back into her oak. The other dryads left, leaving me alone with a cat, a prince, and a stick. I sighed and looked down at the wood in my hands.

“No pressure or anything,” I muttered.

PART III

CHAPTER TWENTY

Iron Dragons and Packrats

We left at dawn. Time enough for me to catch maybe two hours of sleep on the lumpy ground, and say my last goodbyes to Puck. He was still sleeping, deep within the tree, when I woke up in the still hours before sunrise. The dryad attached to the oak told me he still lived, but she didn't have any idea when he would wake.

I stood beside the oak for several minutes, my hand against the bark, trying to feel his heartbeat through the wood. I missed him. Ash and Grimalkin might be allies, but they were not friends. They wanted to use me for their own ends. Only Puck truly cared, and now he was gone.

"Meghan." Ash appeared behind me, his voice surprisingly gentle. "We should go. We can't afford to wait for him, not if it could be months before he wakes up. We don't have that time."

"I know." I pressed my palm into the bark, feeling the rough edges scrape my skin. *Wake up quickly,* I told him, wondering if he dreamed, if he could feel my touch through the tree. *Wake up quickly, and find me. I'll be waiting.*

I turned to Ash, who was dressed for battle, with his sword at his waist and a bow slung across his back. Looking at him made my skin tingle.

"Do you have it?" I asked, to hide the burning in my cheeks.

He nodded, and held up a gleaming white arrow with red veins curling around it. He'd asked for the Witchwood the previous night, claiming he could turn it into a suitable weapon, and I gave it to him without hesitation. Now I stared at the dart, feeling my apprehension grow. It seemed like such a small, fragile thing to take down the supposedly invincible King of the Iron Fey.

"Can I hold it?" I asked, and Ash immediately placed the arrow in my palm, his fingers lingering on mine. The wood throbbed in my hand, a rhythmic *pulse-pulse,* like a heartbeat; I shuddered and held it out, waiting for him to take it back.

“Hold on to it for me,” Ash said softly, his gaze never leaving mine. “This is your quest. You decide when I’m supposed to use it.”

I blushed and opened my backpack, shoving the dart inside. The shaft of the arrow stuck out of the pack, and I closed the zippers around it, securing it in place before swinging the thing over my shoulders. The bag was heavier now; last night, I’d raided a park fountain and scraped up enough change to buy food and bottled water for the rest of the journey. The clerk at the nearby gas station seemed a bit annoyed at having to count handfuls of dimes and quarters at one in the morning, but I didn’t want to start the final leg of our journey empty-handed. I hoped Ash and Grim liked beef jerky, trail mix, and Skittles.

“You’ll only get one shot,” I murmured. Ash smiled without humor.

“Then I’ll have to make it count.”

He sounded so confident. I wondered if he was ever afraid, or had second thoughts about what he had to do. Holding a grudge seemed foolish now, since he was about to follow me into mortal danger. “Look, I’m sorry about last night,” I offered. “I didn’t mean to be a psycho. I was just worried about Ethan. And with Puck getting shot and everything—”

“Don’t worry about it, Meghan.”

I blinked, my stomach fluttering. That was the first time he’d called me by name. “Ash, I—”

“I have been thinking,” Grimalkin announced, leaping onto a rock. I glared and bit down a sigh, cursing his timing. The cat plowed on without notice. “Perhaps we should rethink our strategy,” he said, looking at each of us. “It occurs to me that charging headlong into Machina’s realm is a singularly bad idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well.” The cat sat down and licked his back toes. “Given that he keeps sending his officers after us, I would guess that he probably knows we are coming. Why did he kidnap your brother in the first place? He must have known you would come after him.”

“Overconfident?” I guessed. Grimalkin shook his head.

“No. Something is missing. Or maybe we are just not seeing it. The Iron King would have no use for a child. Unless…” The cat looked up at us, narrowing his eyes. “I am leaving.”

“What? Why?”

“I have a theory.” Grimalkin stood, waving his tail. “I think I might know another way into Machina’s realm. You are welcome to join me.”

“A theory?” Ash crossed his arms. “We can’t break plan on a hunch, Cait Sith.”

“Even if the way you are going leads straight into a trap?”

I shook my head. “We have to risk it. We’re so close, Grim. We can’t turn back now.” I knelt to face Grimalkin eye to eye. “Come with us. We need you. You’ve always pointed us in the right direction.”

“I am not a fighter, human.” Grimalkin shook his head and blinked. “You have the prince for that. I accompanied you to show you the way to your brother, and for my own amusement. But I know my limitations.” He looked at Ash and pinned his ears. “I would be no help to you in there. Not the way you are going. So, it is time we settled our debts and parted ways.”

That’s right. I still owed the cat a favor. Uneasiness stirred. I hoped the cat wouldn’t ask for my voice, or my future kid. I still didn’t know what went on in that devious little head of his. “Right.” I sighed, trying to keep my voice from shaking. Ash moved to stand behind me, a quiet, confident presence. “A deal’s a deal. What do you want, Grim?”

Grimalkin’s gaze bore into me. He sat up straight, flicking his tail. “My price is this,” he stated. “I want to be able to call on you, once, at a time of my choosing, no questions asked. That is my debt.”

Relief washed through me. That didn’t sound so bad. Ash, however, made a thoughtful noise and crossed his arms.

“A summoning?” The prince sounded puzzled. “Odd for you, Cait Sith. What do you hope to accomplish with her?”

Grimalkin ignored him. “When I call,” he continued, staring at me, “you must come straightaway without pause. And you must help me in any way you are able. Those are the terms of our contract. You are bound to me until they are fulfilled.”

“All right.” I nodded. “I can live with that. But if you call, how will I know where to find you?”

Grimalkin sneezed a laugh. “Do not worry about that, human. You will know. But for now, I must leave you.” He stood, nodding once to me, then to Ash. “Until we meet again.”

Then he slipped into the grass, his bottlebrush tail held straight up, and disappeared.

I smiled sadly. “And then there were two.”

Ash moved closer and touched my arm, a brief, featherlight caress. I glanced at him and he offered that tiny, endearing smile, one of apology and encouragement, and a silent promise that he would not leave me. I gave him a shaky grin and resisted the urge to lean into him, wanting to feel his arms around me once more.

A piskie spiraled down from the branches, hovering a few inches from my face. Blue-skinned, with dandelion hair and gossamer wings, she stuck out her tongue at me and zipped to Ash, alighting on his shoulder. Ash cocked his head as the piskie whispered something in his ear. One corner of his mouth turned up; he glanced at me and shook his head. The piskie giggled and spun into the air again. I scowled, wondering what they were saying about me, then decided I didn't care.

"This is Seedlit," Ash said as the piskie spiraled through the air like a drunken hummingbird. "She'll lead us to the wharfs, and then to the factory. Beyond that, we're on our own."

I nodded, my heart hammering in my ears. This was it, the last leg of the journey. At the end was Machina and Ethan, or death. I smirked with rash bravado and raised my chin. "All right, Tinker Bell," I told the piskie, who gave an indignant buzz. "Lead on."

* * *

WE FOLLOWED THE BOBBING light toward the banks of the river, where the cold, slow waters of the Mississippi churned under a slate-gray sky. We didn't speak much. Ash walked beside me, our shoulders almost touching. After several silent minutes, I brushed his hand. He curled his fingers around mine, and we walked like that until we reached the factory.

A corrugated-steel building squatted behind a chain-link fence, a dark smudge against the sky. Seedlit jabbered something to Ash, who nodded gravely, before she zipped away out of sight. She had brought us as far as she could go; now we were on our own.

As we approached the gate, Ash hung back a little, a pained look on his face.

"What's the matter?"

He grimaced. "Nothing. Just…" He nodded to the fence. "Too much iron. I can feel it from here."

"Does it hurt?"

“No.” He shook his head. “I’d have to touch it for that. But it’s draining.” He looked uncomfortable admitting it. “It makes it difficult to use glamour.”

I shook the gate experimentally. It wouldn’t budge. Heavy chains were wrapped around the entrance, padlocked together, and barbed wire coiled along the top of the fence.

“Give me your sword,” I told Ash. He blinked at me.

“What?”

“Give me your sword,” I repeated. “We have to get in, and you don’t like touching iron, right? Let me have it, and I’ll take care of it.”

He looked dubious but pulled his blade and offered it to me, hilt up. I took the weapon gingerly. The hilt was painfully cold, the blade throwing off a frozen blue aura. I raised it over my head and brought it slashing down on the chain binding the gate. The links snapped like they were made of glass, shattering with a metallic ringing sound. Pleased, I grabbed the chain to yank it free, but the metal burned like fire and I dropped it with a cry.

Ash was beside me, reclaiming his sword as I shook my singed fingers, dancing about in pain. After sheathing the weapon, he snatched my flailing hand and turned it palm up. A line of red slashed across my fingers, numb and tingly to the touch.

“I thought I was immune to iron.” I sniffed. Ash sighed.

“You are,” he murmured, moving me away from the fence and its glamour-draining qualities. His expression teetered between amusement and exasperation. “However, grabbing superchilled metal is still very unpleasant for Summer fey, no matter who you are.”

“Oh.”

He shook his head, examining the wound again. “It’s not frostbitten,” he muttered. “It’ll blister, but you should be fine. You might only lose a couple fingers.”

I glanced at him sharply, but he was smirking. For a moment, I was speechless. Good God, the Ice Prince was making jokes now; the world *must* be ending. “That’s not funny,” I hissed, swatting at him with my other hand. He dodged easily, the amusement still on his face.

“You’re a lot like her,” he mused, so softly I barely heard him. And before I could say anything, he turned, drew his sword, and swept the

chains off the gate. It swung open with a creak, and Ash scanned the compound warily

"Stay close to me," he muttered, and we eased our way inside.

Large mounds of scrap metal lay piled about the yard as we walked through, the sharp edges glinting in the faint rays of dawn. Ash winced each time we passed one, keeping a wary eye on it, as if it would leap up and attack him. Strange creatures scampered about the metal drifts, tiny men with ratlike features and naked tails. When they nibbled on a piece of metal, it rusted away under their teeth. They didn't bother us, though Ash shuddered whenever he saw one, and his hand never left his sword.

The iron doors had more chains around them, but the ice blade cut through them easily. Stepping inside, I gazed around slowly, my eyes adjusting to the dim light. It looked like an ordinary warehouse, empty and dark, though I heard skittering noises in the corners. More mountains of scrap metal littered the gloom, some larger than I was tall.

Where's the trod? I wondered, stepping farther inside. Metal grates covered the floor, pressing through my sneakers. Ash hesitated, hanging back in the doorway.

Steam drifted over the ground, coiling around my legs. Against the far wall, I saw that one of the grates had been pried up, leaving a square, gaping hole. Smoke boiled out of the opening. *There!*

I started toward the hole. From the doorway, Ash called for me to stop. Before my nerves could jangle a warning, a pile of scrap metal shifted. Then, with a screech that set my teeth on edge, the mound uncurled, sending sparks into the air as it dragged along the floor. From the jumbled mess, a long neck rose up, made of iron, wire, and broken glass. A reptilian head glared down at me, shards of metal bristling from its skull. Then the entire mound lurched up, shifting into a huge lizard of iron and steel, with curved metal talons and a jagged, spiked tail.

The dragon roared, a deafening metallic screech that made my eyes want to pop out of my skull. It lunged, and I scrambled behind another mound, praying this one wasn't a dragon, too. The dragon hissed and followed, steam erupting from its gaping jaws, steel talons clanking over the floor.

A volley of ice darts flew through the air, striking the dragon in the head and shattering harmlessly off its skull. It screamed and reared up, glaring at Ash, who stood at the far end of the room with his sword drawn.

Lashing its tail, the dragon charged, sparks flying from its claws as it bore down on Ash. My heart jumped to my throat.

Ash closed his eyes for a moment, then knelt and drove his sword point down into the floor. There was a flash of blue light, and ice spread rapidly from the tip, covering the ground and coating everything in crystal. My breath hung in the air, and icicles formed on the overhead beams. I shivered violently in the sudden chill as the scrap metal frosted over, radiating absolute cold.

Ash leaped aside as the dragon reached him, moving as easily on ice as normal ground. Unable to stop itself, the dragon slammed into the wall, bits of metal flying everywhere. It hissed and struggled to rise, sliding on the slick floor, tail thrashing. Ash jumped forward and blew out a long whistle, sending an icy whirlwind spinning through the air. The dragon shrieked as the blizzard whipped around it, coating it with frost and snow. A hoary rime caked its metal body, its struggles growing weaker as ice weighed it down.

Ash stopped, panting heavily. He staggered away from the frozen dragon and leaned back against a post, closing his eyes. I half ran, half stumbled over, slipping on the ice, until I reached him.

"Are you all right?"

"Never again," he muttered, almost to himself. His eyes were still closed, and I wasn't sure he knew I was there. "I will *not* watch that happen again. I won't…lose another…like that. I can't…"

"Ash?" I whispered, touching his arm.

His eyes opened and his gaze dropped to mine. "Meghan," he murmured, seeming a bit confused that I was still there. He blinked and shook his head. "Why didn't you run? I tried to buy you some time. You should've gone ahead."

"Are you crazy? I couldn't leave you to that thing. Now, come on." I took his hand, tugging him off the post while glancing nervously at the frozen dragon. "Let's get out of here. I think that thing just blinked at us."

His fingers tightened on mine and pulled me forward. Startled and overbalanced, I looked up at him, and then he was kissing me.

I froze in shock, but only for a moment. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I rose on my tiptoes to meet him, kissing him back with a hunger that surprised us both. He crushed me close, and I ran my hands through his silky hair, sliding it through my fingers. His lips were cool on mine,

and my mouth tingled. And for a moment, there was no Ethan, no Puck, no Iron King. Only this.

He pulled back, slightly out of breath. My blood raced, and I leaned my head on his shoulder, feeling the steely muscles through his back. I felt him tremble.

"This isn't good," he murmured, his voice curiously shaken. But he still didn't release me. I closed my eyes and listened to his rapid heartbeat.

"I know," I whispered back.

"The Courts would kill us if they found out."

"Yeah."

"Mab would accuse me of treason. Oberon would believe I'm turning you against him. They'd both see grounds for banishment, or execution."

"I'm sorry."

He sighed, burying his face in my hair. His breath was cool on my neck, and I shivered. Neither of us said anything for what seemed a long time.

"We'll think of something," I ventured.

He nodded wordlessly and pulled away, but stumbled as he took a step back. I caught his arm again.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine." He released my elbow. "Too much iron. The spell took a lot out of me."

"Ash—"

A piercing crack interrupted us. The dragon freed a forepaw and smashed it to the floor. More cracks appeared as it struggled to rise, shedding ice. Ash grabbed my hand and ran.

With an enraged shriek, the dragon shattered its ice prison, sending shards flying. We pelted across the room, hearing the dragon give chase, its claws digging into the icy ground. The hole with its missing grate loomed ahead, and we flung ourselves toward it, leaping through the steam and plummeting into the unknown. The dragon's frustrated bellow rang overhead, as clouds of steam enveloped us, and everything went white.

* * *

I DIDN'T REMEMBER LANDING, though I was aware of Ash holding my hand as the steam cleared around us. Eyes widening, we both stared around in

horror.

A twisted landscape stretched out before us, barren and dark, the sky a sickly yellow-gray. Mountains of rubble dominated the land: ancient computers, rusty cars, televisions, dial phones, radios, all piled into huge mounds that loomed over everything. Some of the piles were alight, burning with a thick, choking smog. A hot wind howled through the wasteland, stirring dust into glittering eddies, spinning the wheel of an ancient bicycle lying on a trash heap. Scraps of aluminum, old cans, and foam cups rolled over the ground, and a sharp, coppery smell hung in the air, clogging the back of my throat. The trees here were sickly things, bent and withered. A few bore lightbulbs and batteries that hung like glittering fruit.

"This is the Nevernever," Ash muttered. His voice was grim. "Somewhere in the Deep Tangle, if I had to guess. No wonder the wyldwood is dying."

"*This* is the Nevernever?" I asked, gazing around in shock. I remembered the frigid, pristine beauty of Tir Na Nog, the blinding colors of the Summer Court. "No way. How could it get like this?"

"Machina," Ash replied. "The territories take on the aspects of their rulers. I'm guessing his realm is very small right now, but if it expands, it'll swallow the wyldwood and eventually destroy the Nevernever."

I thought I hated Faeryland, and everything in it, but that was before Ash. This was his home. If the Nevernever died, he would die, too. So would Puck and Grim, and everyone else I met on my strange journey here. "We have to stop it," I exclaimed, gazing around the dead landscape. Smog tickled my throat, making me want to cough. "We can't let this spread."

Ash smiled, cold and frightening. "That's why we're here."

Slowly, we made our way through the mountains of junk, keeping a wary eye on any that might come to life and attack. Out of the corner of my eye I caught movement and spun toward it, fearful of another dragon disguised as harmless debris. It wasn't a dragon this time, but several small, hunch-backed creatures waddling to and fro between the mounds. They looked like withered gnomes, bent over by the huge amount of stuff piled on their backs, like giant hermit crabs. When they found an item they liked—a broken toy, the spokes of a bicycle—they attached it to the

collection on their backs and shuffled to the next mound. Some of their humps were large and quite impressive, in a sad kind of way.

A few of the creatures saw us and came waddling up, beady eyes bright and curious. Ash went for his sword, but I laid a hand on his arm. I sensed these beings weren't dangerous, and perhaps they could point us in the right direction.

"Hello," I greeted softly as they surrounded us, snuffling like eager dogs. "We don't want any trouble. We're just a little lost."

They cocked their heads but didn't say anything. A few pressed closer, and several long fingers reached out to poke my backpack, tugging on the bright material. Not maliciously, but curious, like seagulls pecking at a button. Two of them crowded Ash, pawing at his sword sheath. He shifted uneasily and stepped away.

"I need to find King Machina," I said. "Can you show us where he lives?"

But the creatures weren't paying attention, too busy pawing at my backpack, jabbering among themselves. One gave it an experimental yank that nearly toppled me off my feet.

In a flash of blue light, Ash drew his sword. The creatures scuttled back, their eyes wide and fixated to the glowing blade. A few twitched their fingers, like they wanted to touch it, but knew better than to approach.

"Come on," Ash muttered, pointing his sword at any gnome that edged forward. "They're not going to help us. Let's get out of here."

"Wait." I grabbed his sleeve as he turned. "I've got an idea."

Taking off my pack, I unzipped the side pocket, reached inside, and pulled out the broken iPod from so long ago. Stepping forward, I raised it high, seeing the gnomes follow it with wide, unbroken stares.

"A deal," I called into the silence. They watched me without blinking. "Do you see this?" I said, waving the iPod back and forth. They followed it, like dogs eyeing a cookie. "I'll give it to you, but in return, you take me to the Iron King."

The gnomes turned and jabbered to one another, occasionally peeking back to make sure I was still there. Finally, one of them stepped forward. A whole tricycle teetered at the top of his hump. He fixed me with an unblinking stare, and beckoned me to follow.

We trailed the odd little creatures—whom I secretly dubbed the pack rats—through the wasteland of junk, drawing curious stares from the other residents living there. I saw more of the ratlike men whose teeth rusted metal, a few scrawny dogs wandering about, and swarms of iron bugs crawling over everything. Once, in the distance, I caught a terrifying glimpse of another dragon, unfurling from a mound of trash. Thankfully, it only shifted into a more comfortable sleeping position and returned to its perfect disguise as a pile of debris.

At last, the mountains of garbage fell away, and the lead pack rat pointed a long finger down a barren plain. Across a cracked, gray plateau, spiderwebbed with lava and millions of blinking lights, a railroad stretched away into the distance. Hulking machines, like enormous iron beetles, sat beside it, snorting steam. And silhouetted against the sky, a jagged black tower stabbed up from the earth, wreathed in smog and billowing smoke.

Machina's fortress.

Ash drew in a quiet breath. I stared at the imposing tower, my stomach contracting with fear, until a tug on my backpack snapped me out of my daze. The pack rat stood there, an expectant look on his face, fingers twitching.

"Oh, yeah." Fishing out the iPod, I handed it to him solemnly. "A deal's a deal. Hope you enjoy it."

The pack rat chittered with joy. Clutching the device to his chest, he scuttled off like an enormous crab, vanishing back into the wasteland of junk. I heard excited jabbering, and imagined him showing off his trophy for all to see. Then the voices faded and we were alone.

Ash turned to me, and I was struck with how awful he looked. His skin was ashen; there were shadows under his eyes, and his hair was damp with sweat.

"Will you be all right?" I whispered. One corner of his mouth curled up.

"We'll see, won't we?"

I reached for his hand, wrapped my fingers around his, and squeezed. He put my hand to his face and closed his eyes, as if drawing strength from my touch. Together, we descended into the heart of Machina's realm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Knights of the Iron Crown

"Don't look now," ASH muttered after hours of walking, "but we're being followed."

I craned my head over my shoulder. We were following the railroad—walking beside it, instead of directly on the iron tracks—toward the looming fortress, and hadn't encountered a single creature, faery or otherwise, on the journey. Streetlamps grew out of the ground, lighting the way, and iron behemoths, reminding me of vehicles in a steam-punk anime, crouched along the tracks, hissing smoke. Through the writhing steam, it was difficult to see more than a few yards away.

But then, a small, familiar creature scuttled across the tracks, vanishing into the smoke. I caught a glimpse of a tricycle poking up from a mound of junk and frowned. "Why are the pack rats following us?"

"Pack rats?" Ash smirked at me.

"Yeah, you know, they collect shiny stuff, hoard it in their dens? Pack rats? Oh, never mind." I mock glared at him, too worried to be irritated. Ash never complained, but I could see the iron everywhere was taking a toll on him. "Do you want to stop somewhere and rest?"

"No." He pressed a palm to one eye, as if trying to squelch a headache. "It won't make any difference."

The twisted landscape went on. We passed pools of molten lava, bubbling and shimmering with heat. Smokestacks loomed overhead, belching great spouts of black pollution that writhed into the yellow-gray sky. Lightning arched and crackled across blinking metal towers, and the air hummed with electricity. Pipes crisscrossed the ground, leaking steam from joints and valves, and black wires slashed the sky overhead. The tang of iron, rust, and smog clogged my throat and burned my nose.

Ash spoke very little, stumbling on with grim determination. My worry for him was a constant knot in my stomach. I was doing this to him; it was my contract that bound him to help, even though it was slowly

killing him. But we couldn't turn back, and I could only watch, helpless, as Ash struggled to continue. His breath rasped painfully in his throat, and he grew paler by the hour. Fear clawed my insides. I was terrified he would die and leave me alone in this dark, twisted place.

A day passed, and the iron tower loomed black and menacing overhead, though it was still far in the distance. The sickly yellow-gray of the sky darkened, and the hazy outline of a moon shimmered behind the clouds. I stopped, looking up at the sky. No stars. None at all. The artificial lights reflected off the haze, making the night nearly as bright as the day.

Ash began coughing, putting a hand against a crumbling wall to steady himself. I slipped my arms around him, holding him steady as he leaned into me. The harsh explosions made my heart constrict. "We should rest," I muttered, gazing around for a place to camp. A huge cement tube lay half buried in the dirt at the bottom of the tracks, covered in graffiti, and I motioned him toward it. "Come on."

He didn't argue this time, but followed me down the slope and into the cement shelter. It wasn't tall enough for us to stand up straight, and the floor was sprinkled with chips of colored glass. Not the best of campsites, but at least it wasn't iron. I kicked away a broken bottle and sat down carefully, shrugging off my backpack.

Pulling the sword from his belt, Ash sank down opposite me with a barely concealed groan. The Witchwood arrow throbbed as I unzipped the pack and reached around it for the food and bottled water.

Ripping open a bag of jerky, I offered some to Ash. He shook his head, his eyes weary and dull.

"You should eat something," I chided, gnawing on the dried meat. I wasn't particularly hungry myself, too tired, hot, and worried to have an appetite, but I wanted something in my stomach. "I have trail mix or candy if you want something else. Here." I waggled a bag of peanut mix at him. He eyed it dubiously, and I frowned. "I'm sorry, but they don't sell faery food at mini-marts. Eat."

Mutely, he accepted the bag and poured out a handful of peanuts and raisins. I gazed into the distance, where the looming black tower stabbed into the clouds. "How long do you think until we reach it?" I murmured, just to get him talking again.

Ash tossed the whole handful back, chewed, and swallowed without interest. "I'd guess a day at most," he replied, setting down the bag.

“Beyond that…” He sighed, and his eyes darkened. “I doubt I’d be of much use anymore.”

My stomach convulsed with dread. I couldn’t lose him now. I’d lost so much already; it seemed especially cruel that Ash might not reach the end of our adventure. I needed him as I’d never needed anyone before. *I’ll protect you,* I thought, surprising myself. *You’ll get through this, I promise. Just don’t die on me, Ash.*

Ash met my gaze, as if he could tell what I was thinking, his gray eyes solemn in the shadows of the pipe. I wondered if my emotions were giving away my thoughts, if Ash could read the glamour aura that surrounded me. For a moment, he hesitated, as if fighting a battle within himself. Then with a resigned sigh, he smiled faintly and held out his hand. I took it, and he pulled me close, settling me in front of him and wrapping his arms around my stomach. I leaned back against his chest and listened to his beating heart. With every thump, it told me that this was real, that Ash was here, and alive, and still with me.

The wind picked up, smelling of ozone and some other weird, chemical scent. A drop of rain hit the edge of the pipe, and a tiny wisp of smoke curled into the air. Except for his slow breathing, Ash was perfectly still, as if he feared that any sudden movement would scare me away. I reached down and traced idle patterns on his arm, marveling at the cool, smooth skin under my fingers, like living ice. I felt him shiver, heard his ragged intake of breath.

“Ash?”

“Hmm?”

I licked my lips. “Why did you vow to kill Puck?”

He jerked. I felt his eyes on the back of my neck and bit the inside of my cheek, wishing I could take it back, wondering what made me ask in the first place. “Never mind,” I told him, waving a hand. “Forget it. You don’t have to tell me. I was just wondering—”

Who you really are. What Puck has done to make you hate him. I want to understand. I feel I don’t know either of you.

A few more drops of rain hit the ground, hissing in the silence. I chewed my jerky strips and stared out into the rain, hyperaware of Ash’s body, of his arms around my waist. I heard him shift to a more comfortable position and sigh.

“It was a long time ago,” he murmured, his voice almost lost in the rising wind, “before you were even born. Winter and Summer had been at peace for several seasons. There were always minor skirmishes between the courts, but for the longest time in centuries, we actually left each other alone.

“Near the end of summer,” he went on, a bit of pain creeping into his voice, “things began to change. The fey don’t deal well with boredom, and some of the more impatient members started mischief with Summer again. I should’ve known there would be trouble, but that season, I wasn’t thinking of politics. The entire court was bored and restless, but I…” His voice broke, only for a moment, before continuing. “I was with my lady, Ariella Tularyn.”

I felt the breath sucked out of me. His lady. Ash had been involved, once. And, judging from the veiled hurt in his voice, he’d loved her a lot. I stiffened, suddenly too aware of my breath, of his arms around my waist. Ash didn’t seem to notice.

“We were hunting in the wyldwood,” he went on, resting his chin atop my head. “Following the rumor of a golden fox that had been seen in the area. There were three of us that day, hunting together. Ariella, myself, and…and Robin Goodfellow.”

“Puck?”

Ash shifted uncomfortably. Thunder growled in the distance, shooting threads of green lightning across the sky. “Yes,” he muttered, as if it pained him to say it. “Puck. Puck was…he was a friend, once. I wasn’t ashamed to call him that. Back then, the three of us would often meet one another in the wyldwood, away from the condemnation of the courts. We didn’t care about the rules. Back then, Puck and Ariella were my closest companions. I trusted them completely.”

“What happened?”

Ash’s voice was soft with memory as he continued. “We were hunting,” he explained again, “following our quarry into a territory none of us had seen. The wyldwood is huge, and some parts are constantly shifting, so it can be dangerous, even for us. We tracked the golden fox for three days, through unfamiliar woods and forest, making bets on whose arrow would finally take it down. Puck boasted that Winter would surely lose to Summer, and Ariella and I made the same boast in reverse. All the while, the forest around us grew dark and wild. Our horses were fey steeds

whose hooves didn’t touch the ground, but they were growing increasingly nervous. We should have listened to them, but we didn’t, stubborn pride leading us on like fools.

“Finally, on the fourth day, we came to a rise that plunged down into a vast hollow. On the other side, trotting along the ridge, was the golden fox. The hollow separating us wasn’t deep, but it was wide and filled with tangled shadows and undergrowth, making it difficult to see what was down there.

“Ariella wanted to go around, even though it would take us longer. Puck disagreed, insisting we would lose our quarry unless we rode straight through. We argued. I sided with Ariella—though I didn’t see the reason for her apprehension, if she wasn’t willing to go forward, I wasn’t going to make her.

“Puck, however, had other ideas. As I turned my horse around, he let out a whoop, slapped Ariella’s horse on the rump, and kicked his own steed forward. They plunged over the edge, racing down the slope, with Puck yelling at me to catch up if I could. I had no choice but to follow.”

Ash fell silent, his eyes dark and haunted. He gazed off into the distance, until I couldn’t take it anymore. “What happened?” I whispered.

He gave a bitter laugh. “Ariella was right, of course. Puck had led us straight into a wyvern nest.”

I felt stupid for asking but…“What’s a wyvern?”

“It’s cousin to a dragon,” Ash replied. “Not as intelligent, but still extremely dangerous. And highly territorial. The thing rose up out of nowhere, all scales and teeth and wings, lashing at us with its poisoned stinger. It was enormous, an ancient drake, vicious and powerful. We fought our way free, the three of us, side by side. We’d been together so long we knew one another’s fighting styles, and used them to take down the enemy. It was Ariella who landed the killing blow. But, as it was dying, the wyvern whipped its tail out one last time, striking her in the chest. Wyvern poison is extremely potent, and we were miles from any healers. We…we tried to save her, but…”

He paused, taking a shaky breath. I squeezed his arm to console him.

“She died in my arms,” he finished, making an audible effort to compose himself. “She died with my name on her lips, begging me to save her. As I held her, watched the life fade from her eyes, I could only think

one thing—that Puck had caused this. If it wasn't for him, she would still be alive."

"I'm so sorry, Ash."

Ash nodded once. His voice turned steely. "I swore, on that day, to avenge Ariella's death, to kill Robin Goodfellow, or die trying. We've clashed several times since, but Goodfellow always manages to slip away, or throw me some trick that ends our duels. I cannot rest while he lives. I promised Ariella that I would continue hunting Robin Goodfellow until one of us lies dead."

"Puck told me it was a mistake. He didn't mean for that to happen." The words were sour in my mouth. It didn't feel right, defending him. Ash had lost someone he loved because of Puck's actions, a prank that finally went too far.

"It doesn't matter." Ash shifted away from me, his voice cold. "My vow is binding. I cannot rest until I've completed my oath."

I didn't know what to say, so I stared into the rain, miserable and torn in two. Ash and Puck, two enemies locked in a struggle that would end only when one of them killed the other. How could you stand between two people like that, knowing that one day, one of them would succeed? I knew faery oaths were binding, and Ash had good reason to hate Puck, but I still felt trapped. I couldn't stop this, but I didn't want either of them to die.

Ash sighed and leaned forward again, brushing my hand, tracing the skin with his fingertips. "I'm sorry," he murmured. A shiver went up my arm. "I wish you didn't have to be involved. There is no way to unmake a vow, once it has been spoken. But know this—were I aware then that I would meet you, perhaps my oath would not have been so hasty."

My throat closed up. I wanted to say something, but at that moment, a sharp blast of wind blew a few drops of rain into the tube. Water splashed over my jeans, and I yelped as something burned my skin.

We examined my leg. Tiny holes marred my jeans where the drops had hit, the material seared away, the skin underneath red and burned. It throbbed as if I'd jabbed needles into my flesh.

"What the heck?" I muttered, glaring into the storm. It looked like ordinary rain—gray, misty, somewhat depressing. Almost compulsively, I stuck my hand toward the opening, where water dripped over the edge of the tube.

Ash grabbed my wrist, snatching it back. “Yes, it will burn your hand as well as your leg,” he said in a bland voice. “And here I thought you learned your lesson with the chains.”

Embarrassed, I dropped my hand and scooted farther into the tube, away from the rim and the acid rain dripping from it. “Guess I’m staying up all night,” I muttered, crossing my arms. “Wouldn’t want to doze off and find half my face melted off when I wake up.”

Ash pulled me back against him, brushing my hair from my neck. His mouth skimmed my shoulder, up my neck, sending butterflies swarming through my insides. “If you want to rest, then do so,” he murmured against my skin. “The rain will not touch you, I promise.”

“What about you?”

“I wasn’t planning to sleep.” He made a casual gesture at a trickle of rainwater seeping into the tube, and the water turned to ice. “I fear I wouldn’t be able to wake up.”

My worry spiked. “Ash—”

His lips brushed my ear. “Sleep, Meghan Chase,” he whispered, and suddenly I couldn’t keep my eyes open. Half my consciousness still struggled as darkness pulled me under and I sank into his waiting arms.

* * *

WHEN I AWOKE, THE RAIN HAD stopped and everything had dried, though the ground still steamed. There was no visible sun through the choking clouds, but the air still blistered with heat. I grabbed my backpack and crawled out of the pipe, looking around for Ash. He sat against the outside of the tube, head back, sword resting on his knees. Seeing him, I felt a rush of anger and fear. He’d enchanted me last night, spelled me to sleep without my consent. Which meant he’d probably used glamour, though his own body was getting weaker and weaker. Fuming and afraid, I stomped up to him and put my hands on his hips. Gray eyes cracked open and regarded me blearily.

“Don’t do that again.” I’d intended to yell at him, but his vulnerability made me pause. He blinked, but had the grace not to ask what I was talking about.

“My apologies,” he murmured, bowing his head. “I thought at least one of us could benefit from a few hours’ sleep.”

God, he looked awful. His cheeks were hollow, dark circles crouched under his eyes, and his skin was almost translucent. I needed to find Ethan and get us all out of here, before Ash turned into a walking skeleton and collapsed dead at my feet.

Ash looked past me to the tower, seeming to draw strength from it. “Not far now,” he murmured, as if it were a mantra that kept him going. I held out my hand, and he let me pull him to his feet.

We started following the tracks again.

The smokestacks and metal towers slowly fell away behind us as we continued across Machina’s realm. The land grew flat and barren, and steam billowed out of cracks in the ground, coiling around us like wraiths. Colossal machines, with enormous iron wheels and armored shells, lay beside the tracks. They looked like a cross between modern-day tanks and the mecha vehicles of anime. They were old and rusty, and reminded me strangely of Ironhorse.

Ash grunted suddenly and fell, his legs buckling underneath him. I grabbed his arm as he pulled himself upright, panting. He felt so thin.

“Should we stop and rest?” I asked.

“No,” he gritted out. “Keep going. We have to—”

Suddenly he straightened, his hand going to his sword.

Ahead of us, the steam cleared, parting enough to reveal a hulking figure standing on the tracks. A horse made of iron and snorting flame, steel hooves pawing the ground. His glowing eyes watched us balefully.

“Ironhorse!” I gasped, wondering, for a surreal moment, if my earlier thoughts had summoned him here.

“THOUGHT YOU GOT RID OF ME, DID YOU?” Ironhorse boomed, his voice reverberating off the machines around us. “IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN A CAVE-IN TO KILL ME. I MADE THE MISTAKE OF UNDERESTIMATING YOU BEFORE. THAT WON’T HAPPEN AGAIN.”

Movement surged around us as hundreds of gremlins crawled into view, hissing and crackling. They swarmed over the machines like spiders, laughing and chittering, and scuttled along the ground. In seconds, they had us surrounded, a living black carpet. Ash drew his sword, and the gremlins hissed at him nastily.

Two figures appeared through the steam on either side of us. They marched forward in unison, and the gremlins parted to let them through. Warriors in full battle armor, with helmets and masks covering their faces,

stepped into the circle. Their insectlike suits looked like something from a science-fiction movie, somehow ancient and modern at the same time. Their breastplates bore the insignia of a barbed-wire crown. Drawing their swords, they stepped forward.

"Meghan, get back," Ash muttered, squaring off against the armored pair coming at him.

"Are you crazy? You can't fight like this—"

"Go!"

Reluctantly, I backed away, but was suddenly grabbed from behind. I yelped and kicked, but was dragged to the edge of the circle, where the gremlins jabbered at me. I twisted around and saw that my captor was a third warrior.

"Meghan!" Ash tried to follow, but the first two knights blocked his way, the sickly light glinting off their iron blades. Glaring at them, Ash flourished his sword and sank into a battle stance.

They lunged at him, swords sweeping down in a blur, coming both low and high. Ash leaped over the first and parried the second, knocking it away with a flurry of ice and sparks. He landed, spun to his left to block the savage back strike, and ducked as the second blade hissed overhead. Whirling around, his sword lashed out, slicing across one armored chest with a grinding screech. The knight staggered back, the image of the wire crown cut through and coated with frost.

They broke away for a moment, facing each other, swords at the ready. Ash was panting, his eyes narrowed in concentration. He didn't look good, and my stomach tightened in fear. The other knights slowly began to circle him, coming at him from different sides like stalking wolves. But before they could get into position, Ash snarled and lunged.

For a moment, the knight he engaged was driven back by the ferocity of the attack. Ash hammered into him relentlessly, his blade slipping through his enemy's guard to smash at his armor. Sparks flew, and the knight stumbled, almost falling. Ash's blade swept up and struck a vicious blow to the side of his head, ripping the helmet clean off.

I gasped. The face beneath the helmet was Ash, or at least a long-lost brother. Same gray eyes, same ebony hair, same pointed ears. The face was a little older, and a scar slashed its way down his cheek, but the similarities were almost perfect.

The real Ash hesitated, just as stunned as I, and that cost him dearly. The second knight rushed up behind him, his sword slashing down, and Ash whirled—too late. His blade caught his opponent's sword, but the blow knocked the weapon from his hands. At the same time, his companion backhanded Ash with his metal gauntlet, striking him behind the ear. Ash crumpled to the ground on his back, and two iron swords were pressed against his throat.

"No!" I tried to run to him, but the third warrior held me and twisted my arms behind my back. Manacles were snapped around my wrists. The two knights kicked Ash onto his stomach and wrenched his arms behind him, binding him similarly. I heard him gasp as the metal touched his flesh, and his doppelgänger jerked him savagely to his feet.

They shoved us toward Ironhorse, who waited for us in the middle of the tracks, swishing his tail. His iron mask gave nothing away.

"GOOD," he snorted. "KING MACHINA WILL BE PLEASED." His red eyes fastened on Ash, who was barely able to stand, and he pinned back his ears. "DISPOSE OF THEIR WEAPONS," he ordered disdainfully.

Ash's face was twisted in agony. Sweat trickled down his brow, and he clenched his teeth. He watched the iron knight take his sword to the edge of the tracks and toss it into a ditch. There was a soft splash as the blade hit the oily water and sank from view. A second knight did the same with the bow. I held my breath, praying they wouldn't see the most important weapon of all.

"THE ARROW, TOO."

My heart sank and despair rose up in me. Ash's doppelgänger approached, yanked the Witchwood arrow from my backpack, and tossed it into the ditch with the rest of the weapons. My heart plummeted even further, and the tiny sliver of hope shriveled into a ball and died. That was it, then. Game over. We had failed.

Ironhorse looked us both over and snorted steam. "NO FUNNY BUSINESS FROM YOU, PRINCESS," he warned, blowing smoke at me. "OR MY KNIGHTS WILL WRAP SO MUCH IRON AROUND THE WINTER PRINCE THAT HIS SKIN WILL PEEL OFF HIS BONES." He coughed flame, singeing my eyebrows, and swung his head toward the waiting fortress. "LET'S GO. KING MACHINA AWAITS."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ash's Final Stand

It was a torturous, nightmare march toward Machina's tower.

A length of chain had been wrapped around my waist, attaching me to Ironhorse, who walked briskly down the tracks without pausing or looking back. Beside me, Ash wore another, and I knew it was hurting him. He kept stumbling, barely managing to keep his feet as we followed Ironhorse down the railroad tracks. Gremlins cavorted around us, poking and pinching and laughing at our torment. The knights walked to either side and refused to let Ash step off the iron tracks, shoving him back if he tried. Once, he fell, and was dragged several yards before he finally got his feet under him again. Angry red burns crisscrossed his face where his skin had touched the metal tracks, and I ached for him.

The sky clouded over, changing from yellow-gray to an ominous reddish-black in a matter of moments. Ironhorse stopped and craned his neck, flaring his nostrils.

"DAMN," he muttered, stomping a hoof. "IT'S GOING TO RAIN SOON."

My stomach turned at the thought of the acid rain. Lightning flashed, filling the air with a sharp tang.

"QUICKLY, BEFORE THE STORM HITS." The horse stepped off the tracks, breaking into a trot as thunder growled overhead. My legs burned as I broke into an awkward sprint behind him, every muscle screaming in protest, but it was either keep up or be dragged. Ash stumbled and fell, and this time he did not get up.

A drop of rain spattered against my leg, and a searing pain lanced through me. I gasped. More drops fell, hissing as they struck the ground. The air reeked of chemicals, and I heard a few gremlins screech as the raindrops hit them, as well.

A silvery curtain of rain crept toward us. It caught up to a few of the slower gremlins, engulfing them. They screamed and writhed, sparks

leaping off their bodies, until they gave a final twitch and were still. The rain came on.

Panicked, I looked up to see Ironhorse leading us into a mine shaft. We ducked under the roof just as the storm swept over us, catching a few more gremlins, who squealed and danced around in agony, holes burned through their skin. The rest of the gremlins jeered and laughed. I turned away before I was sick.

Ash lay motionless on the ground, covered in dust and blood from where he'd been dragged. Steam curled off his body where the raindrops had hit. He groaned and tried to get up, but didn't quite make it off his back. Snickering, a few gremlins started poking him, climbing onto his chest to slap his face. He flinched and turned away, but this only encouraged them further.

"Stop it!" I lunged and kicked a gremlin with all my might, launching it away from Ash like a football. The others turned on me, and I lashed out at them all, kicking and stomping. Hissing, they swarmed up my pant legs, pulling my hair and raking me with their claws. One sank its razor-sharp teeth into my shoulder, and I screamed.

"ENOUGH!" Ironhorse's shout made the ceiling tremble. Dirt showered us, and the gremlins skittered back. Blood ran down my skin from a dozen tiny wounds, and my shoulder throbbed where the gremlin had bitten it. Ironhorse glared at me, swishing his tail against his flanks, then tossed his head at the knights.

"TAKE THEM INTO THE TUNNELS," he ordered with a hint of exasperation. "MAKE SURE THEY DO NOT ESCAPE. IF THE STORM DOES NOT ABATE, WE MIGHT BE HERE AWHILE."

The chains binding us to Ironhorse were released. Two knights pulled Ash to his feet and half dragged him away down a tunnel. The last knight, the one with Ash's face, took me by the arm and led me after his brothers.

We paused at a junction where several tunnels merged. Wooden tracks led off into the darkness, and rickety cars half-filled with ore sat off to the sides. Thick wooden beams held up the ceiling, standing along the tracks every few feet. A few lanterns had been nailed into the wood, though most were broken and dark. In the flickering torchlight, glimmering veins of iron snaked across the walls.

We continued down a tunnel that dead-ended in a small room, where two wooden posts stood side by side in the middle of the room. A few

crates and an abandoned pickax lay stacked in a corner. The knights pushed Ash against one post, unlocked a cuff, and reattached it behind the beam, securing him in place. The flesh under the metal band was red and burned, and he jerked when they snapped it around his wrist again. I bit my lip in sympathy.

The knight who'd first caught me straightened and patted Ash on the cheek, chuckling as Ash flinched away from the steel gauntlet. "Feels good, don't it, worm?" he said, and I started in surprise. This was the first time I'd heard one of them speak. "You oldbloods are completely weak, aren't you? It's high time you moved over. You're obsolete now, ancient. Your time is done."

Ash raised his head and stared the other faery in the eye. "Bold words for someone who stood aside and wrestled a girl while his brothers fought for him."

The knight backhanded him. I cried out in fury and started forward, but the knight behind me grabbed my arm. "Leave him alone, Quintus," he said in a calm voice.

Quintus sneered. "Feeling sorry for him, Tertius? Maybe some brotherly affection for your twin here?"

"We're not supposed to speak to the oldbloods," Tertius replied in the same cool tone. "You know that. Or should I inform Ironhorse?"

Quintus spat on the ground. "You were always weak, Tertius," he snarled. "Too softhearted to be made of iron. You're a disgrace to the brotherhood." He spun on a heel and marched up the tunnel, the last knight following behind. Their boots rang loudly on the stone floor, then faded into silence.

"Jerk," I muttered as the remaining knight maneuvered me against the post. "Your name's Tertius, right?"

He unlocked a shackle and wound the chain around the beam, not looking at me. "Yes."

"Help us," I pleaded. "You're not like them, I can feel it. Please, I have to rescue my brother and get him out of here. I'll make a deal with you, if that's what it takes. Please, help us."

For a moment, he met my eyes. I was struck again by how much he resembled Ash. His eyes were gunmetal-gray instead of silver, and the scar made him look older, but he had that same intense, honorable face. He

paused, and for a moment, I dared to hope. But then he snapped the cuff around my wrist and stepped away, his eyes darkening to black.

"I'm a Knight of the Iron Crown," he said, his voice as hard as steel. "I will not betray my brothers, or my king."

He turned and walked away without looking back.

* * *

IN THE FLICKERING DARKNESS of the tunnel, I heard Ash's raspy breathing, the shift of gravel as he sank into a sitting position. "Ash?" I called softly, my voice echoing down the shafts. "You all right?"

Silence for a moment. When Ash finally spoke, his voice was so low I could barely hear it. "Sorry, princess," he murmured, almost to himself. "Looks like I won't be able to uphold our contract after all."

"Don't give up," I told him, feeling like a hypocrite as I struggled with my own despair. "We'll get out of this somehow. We just have to keep our heads." A thought came to me, and I lowered my voice. "Can't you freeze the chains until they shatter, like you did in the factory?"

A low, humorless chuckle. "Right now, it's taking everything I have not to pass out," Ash muttered, sounding pained. "If you have any of that power the Elder Dryad was talking about, now would be the time to use it."

I nodded. What did we have to lose? Closing my eyes, I concentrated on feeling the glamour around us, trying to remember what Grimalkin had taught me.

Nothing. Except for a flicker of raw determination from Ash, there were no emotions to draw from, no hopes or dreams or anything. Everything here was dead, devoid of life, passionless. The iron fey were too machinelike—cold, logical, and calculating—and their world reflected that.

Refusing to give up, I pushed deeper, trying to get past the banal surface. This had been the Nevernever once. There had to be something left untouched by Machina's influence.

I felt a pulse of life, somewhere deep below. A lone tree, poisoned and dying, but still clinging to life. Its branches were slowly turning to metal, but the roots, and the heart of the tree, were not yet corrupted. It stirred to my presence, a tiny piece of the Nevernever in the void of nothingness.

But before I could do anything, shuffling footsteps broke my concentration, and the link faded away.

I opened my eyes. The light in the tunnel had gone out, leaving us in pitch blackness. I heard creatures moving toward us, surrounding us, and I couldn't see a thing. My mind jumped to all sorts of terrifying conclusions: giant rats, huge cockroaches, massive underground spiders. I almost fainted when something patted my arm, but then I heard the low babble of familiar voices.

A yellowish beam clicked on in the darkness: a flashlight. It illuminated the curious, wrinkled faces of a half-dozen pack rats, blinking in the sudden light. Surprised, I stared at them as they chittered at me in their odd language. Several surrounded Ash, pulling at his sleeves.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered. They jabbered nonsense and tugged on my clothes, as if trying to drag me away. "Are you trying to help?"

The pack rat with the tricycle stepped forward. He pointed at me, then at the back of the room. In the flashlight beam, I saw the mouth of another tunnel, nearly invisible in the shadows. It was only partly formed, as if the miners had started digging only to abandon it. A way out? My heart leaped. The pack rat jibbered impatiently and beckoned me forward.

"I can't," I told him, rattling my chain. "I can't move."

He chattered at the rest of them, and they shuffled forward. One by one, they reached behind them, to the lumps of trash on their backs, and began pulling things out.

"What are they doing?" Ash muttered.

I couldn't begin to answer. One of the pack rats produced an electric drill, showing it to the leader, who shook his head. Another pulled out a butterfly knife, but the leader declined that, too, as well as a lighter, a hammer, and a round alarm clock. Then one of the smaller pack rats chittered excitedly and stepped forward, holding something long and metallic.

A pair of bolt cutters.

The lead pack rat jabbered and pointed. But at the same time, I heard the clank of steel boots coming down the tunnel, and the scuttling of thousands of claws on rock. My stomach twisted. The knights were coming back, and so were the gremlins.

“Hurry!” I urged, as the pack rat waddled over and began sawing at the chain. Lights appeared in the distance, bobbing along the ground; gremlins with lanterns or flashlights. Laughter drifted into the room, and my stomach churned. *Hurry!* I thought, furious with the pack rat’s slow progress. *We’re not going to make it! They’ll be here any second!*

I felt the snap of links as they parted, and I was free.

Grabbing the bolt cutters, I raced over to Ash. The lights moved closer and closer, and the hissing of gremlins could be heard down the tunnel. I inserted the chain between the metal jaws and squeezed the handles, but the tool was rusty and hard to use. Snarling curses, I gripped the handles and pushed.

“Leave me,” Ash muttered as I strained to close the jaws. “I won’t be able to help, and I’ll only slow you down. Just go.”

“I’m not leaving you,” I panted, gritting my teeth and pushing with all my might.

“Meghan…”

“I’m not leaving you!” I snapped, fighting angry tears. Stupid chain! Why wouldn’t it break already? I threw my whole weight against it, sawing with a fury born of fear.

“Remember when I told you about your weakness?” Ash murmured, craning his head to look at me. Though his eyes were hard, glazed over with pain, his voice was gentle. “You have to make that choice now. What is most important to you?”

“Shut up!” Tears blinded me, and I blinked them away. “You can’t ask me to make that decision. You’re important to me, too, dammit. I’m not leaving you behind, so just shut up.”

The first wave of gremlins entered the tunnel and shrieked in alarm when they saw me. With a snarl of fear and terror, I gave the bolt cutters a final jerk, and the chain finally snapped. Ash pulled himself to his feet as the gremlins howled with outrage and surged forward.

We ran for the hidden tunnel, following the pack rats as they scuttled through. The corridor was low and narrow; I had to duck my head to avoid the ceiling, and the walls scraped my arms as we fled. Behind us, gremlins poured through the opening like ants, skittering along the walls and ceiling, hissing as they pursued.

Ash suddenly stopped. Turning to face the horde, he raised a pickax like a baseball bat, bracing himself against the wall. I gave a start; he

must've snatched it from the crates, right before we reached the tunnel. The broken chains, still dangling from his wrists, trembled as his arms shook. The gremlins halted a few yards away, their eyes bright as they analyzed this new threat. As one they began edging forward.

"Ash!" I called. "What are you doing? Come on!"

"Meghan." Ash's voice, despite the pain below the surface, was calm. "I hope you find your brother. If you see Puck again, tell him I regret having to step out of our duel."

"Ash, no! Don't do this!"

I felt him smile. "You made me feel alive again," he murmured.

Screeching, the gremlins attacked.

Ash smashed two of them senseless with the pickax, ducked as another leaped at his head, and was overwhelmed. They swarmed over him, clinging to his legs and arms, biting and clawing. He staggered and dropped to a knee, and they skittered up his back, until I could no longer see him through the writhing mass of gremlins. Still, Ash fought on; with a snarl, he surged back to his feet, sending several gremlins flying only to have a dozen more take their place.

"Meghan, go!" His voice was a hoarse rasp as he slammed a gremlin into the wall. "*Now!*"

Choking on tears, I turned and fled. I followed the beckoning pack rats until the tunnel split and branched off in several directions. A pack rat pulled something from his lump and waved it at the leader. I gasped when I saw that it was a stick of dynamite. The leader snarled something, and another pack rat scuttled forward with a lighter.

I couldn't help but look back, just in time to see Ash finally pulled under the sea of gremlins and lost from view. The gremlins screeched in triumph and flowed toward us.

The fuse sputtered to life. The lead pack rat hissed at me and pointed to the tunnels, where the rest of them were vanishing. Tears flowing down my cheeks, I followed, and the pack rat holding the dynamite flung it toward the oncoming gremlins.

The *boom* shook the ceiling. Dirt and rocks rained down on me, filling the air with grit. I coughed and sagged against the wall, waiting for the chaos to die down. When everything was still, I looked up to see that the entrance to the tunnel had caved in. The pack rats were moaning softly. One of their own hadn't made it through in time.

Sagging down the wall, I pulled my knees to my chest and joined them in their grieving, feeling I’d left my heart in the tunnel where Ash had fallen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Iron King

For several minutes, I SAT there, too numb to even cry. I couldn't believe that Ash was really dead. I kept staring at the caved-in wall, half expecting him to somehow, miraculously, push through the rubble, bruised and bloody, but alive.

How long I sat there, I don't know. But eventually, the lead pack rat tugged gently on my sleeve. His eyes, solemn and sad, met mine, before he turned away and beckoned me to follow. With one final look at the cave-in behind us, I trailed them into the tunnels.

We walked for hours, and gradually, the tunnels turned into natural caverns, dripping with water and stalactites. The pack rats loaned me a flashlight, and as I shined it about the caves, I saw that the floor was littered with strange items, a fender here, a toy robot there. It seemed we were heading deep into the pack rats' nest, for the farther we went, the more junk lay strewn about.

At last, we entered a cathedral-like cave, where the ceiling soared up into blackness, and the walls were piled with mountains of trash, resembling the Wasteland in miniature.

In the center of the room, sitting on a throne made entirely of junk, was an old, old man. His skin was gray, and I don't mean pale or ashen, but metallic-gray, mercury-gray. His white hair flowed past his feet, nearly touching the floor, as if he hadn't moved from his chair in centuries. The pack rats shuffled around him, holding up various items, placing them at his feet. I saw my iPod among them. The old man smiled as the pack rats chittered and milled around him like eager dogs, then his pale green eyes looked up at me.

He blinked several times, as if he couldn't trust what he was seeing. I held my breath. Was this Machina? Had the pack rats brought me straight to the Iron King? For an all-powerful ruler, I didn't expect him to be so… old.

“Well,” he wheezed at last, “my subjects have brought me many curious things over the years, but I do believe this is the most unusual. Who are you, girl? Why are you here?”

“I…My name is Meghan, sir. Meghan Chase. I’m looking for my brother.”

“Your brother?” The old man looked at the pack rats, aghast. “I don’t recall you bringing home a child. What has gotten into you?”

The pack rats chittered, shaking their heads. The old man frowned at them as they jabbered and bounced around, then looked back at me. “My subjects tell me they have not encountered anyone except you and your friend out in the Wasteland. Why do you think your brother would be here?”

“I…” I stopped, gazing around at the dingy cavern, the pack rats, the frail old man. This couldn’t be right. “I’m sorry,” I continued, feeling stupid and confused, “but…are you Machina, the Iron King?”

“Ah.” The old man settled back, lacing his hands together. “Now I understand. Machina has your brother, yes? And you are on your way to rescue him.”

“Yes.” I relaxed, breathing a sigh of relief. “Then, I guess you’re not the Iron King?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” The old man smiled, and my guard went back up. He chuckled. “Worry not, child. I mean you no harm. But you would do well to abandon your plan to rescue your brother. Machina is too strong. No weapon can hurt him. You’d be throwing your life away.”

I remembered the Witchwood arrow, lying at the bottom of a ditch, and my heart constricted. “I know,” I whispered. “But I have to try. I’ve come this far. I’m not giving up now.”

“If Machina has stolen your brother, he must be waiting for you,” the old man said, leaning forward. “He wants you for something. I can feel the power in you, my girl, but it will not be enough. The Iron King is a master of manipulation. He will use you to further his own schemes, and you will not be able to resist. Go home, girl. Forget what you have lost and go home.”

“Forget?” I thought of my friends, who had sacrificed everything to see me this far. Puck. The Elder Dryad. Ash. “No,” I murmured, a lump forming in my throat. “I can never forget. Even if it’s hopeless, I have to go on. I owe everyone that much.”

“Foolish girl,” the old man growled. “I know more about Machina than anyone—his ways, his power, the way his mind works—and yet you still will not hear me. Very well. Rush to your doom, like everyone who came before you. You will see, as I did, far too late. Machina cannot be defeated. I only wish I’d listened to my councilors when they told me as much.”

“*You* tried to defeat him?” I stared, trying to imagine the frail old man fighting anyone and failing. “When? Why?”

“Because,” the old man explained patiently, “I was once the Iron King.

“My name is Ferrum,” the old man explained into my shocked silence. “As you no doubt noticed, I am old. Older than that whelp Machina, older than all of the iron fey. I was the first, you see, born of the forges, when mankind first began to experiment with iron. I rose from their imagination, from their ambition to conquer the world with a metal that could slice through bronze like paper. I was there when the world started to shift, when humans took their first steps out of the Dark Ages into civilization.

“For many years, I thought I was alone. But mankind is never satisfied—he is always reaching, always trying for something better. Others came, others like me, risen from these dreams of a new world. They accepted me as their king, and for centuries, we remained hidden, isolated from the rest of the fey. I realized, beyond a doubt, that if the courts knew of our existence, they would unite to destroy us.

“Then, with the invention of computers, the gremlins came, and the bugs. Given life by the fear of monsters lurking in machines, these were more chaotic than the other fey, violent and destructive. They spread to every part of the world. As technology became a driving force in every country, powerful new fey rose into existence. Virus. Glitch. And Machina, the most powerful of all. He was not content to sit and hide. His plan was conquest, to spread throughout the Nevernever like a virus, destroying all who opposed him. He was my First—my most powerful lieutenant—and we clashed on several occasions. My advisers told me to banish him, to imprison him, even to kill him. They were afraid of him, and rightly so, but I was blind to the danger.

“Of course, it was only a matter of time before Machina turned on me. Gathering an army of like-minded fey to his side, he attacked the fortress from within, slaughtering all who were loyal to me. My forces fought back, but we were old and obsolete, no match for Machina’s cruel army.

“In the end, I sat on my throne and watched him approach, knowing I was going to die. But, as Machina threw me to the floor, he laughed and said he would not kill me. He would let me fade away a bit at a time, becoming obscure and forgotten, until no one remembered my name or who I was. And, as he settled back upon my throne, I felt my power slip away and flow into Machina, acknowledging him as the new Iron King.

“So, now I live here.” Ferrum gestured to the cavern and the pack rats milling about. “In a forgotten cave, sitting on a throne made of garbage, king of the mighty trash collectors. A noble title, is it not?” His lips twisted into a bitter smile. “These creatures are very loyal, bringing me offerings that I cannot use, making me ruler of this junk heap. They have accepted me as their king, but what good is that? They cannot give me back my throne, and yet they are the only ones that keep me from fading away. I cannot die, but I can hardly bear to live, knowing what I’ve lost. What was stolen from me. And Machina is the one who designed it all!”

He slumped on his throne and buried his face in his hands. The pack rats shuffled forward, patting him, making worried chittering sounds. Watching him, I felt a surge of sympathy and disgust.

“I’ve lost things, too,” I said, over the sound of his quiet sobbing. “Machina has stolen a lot from me. But I’m not going to sit on a chair and wait for him. I’ll confront him, invincible or not, and somehow I’ll take back what’s mine. Or I’ll die trying. Either way, I’m not giving up.”

He stared at me through his fingers, his frail form shaking with tears. He sniffed and lowered his hands, his face sullen and dark.

“Go, then,” Ferrum whispered, shooing me away. “I cannot sway you. Perhaps a single unarmed girl will succeed where an entire army has failed.” He laughed then, bitter and petulant, and I felt a flicker of annoyance. “Good luck to you, foolish one. If you will not listen to me, you are welcome here no longer. My subjects will take you under his fortress, through the secret tunnels that honeycomb the land. It’s the quickest way to rush to your destruction. Now, go. I am through with you.”

I didn’t bow. I didn’t thank him for his help. I only turned and followed the pack rats out of the cave, feeling the hateful glare of the deposed king on my back.

* * *

MORE TUNNELS. THE BRIEF respite with the last Iron King wasn't enough to stave off my exhaustion. We rested infrequently, and I caught what little sleep I could. The pack rats gave me some strange mushrooms to chew on, tiny white things that glowed in the dark and tasted like mold, but allowed me to see in pitch blackness as if it were twilight. This was a good thing, because my flashlight eventually flickered and died, and no one offered fresh batteries.

I lost track of time. All the caverns and tunnels seemed to meld together into one giant, impossible maze. I knew that, even if I did get into Machina's fortress and rescue Ethan, I wouldn't be getting out the same way.

The tunnel fell away, and suddenly I stood on a stone bridge across a vast precipice, jagged rocks spearing up from the bottom. Around me, on the walls and ceiling, hanging precariously close to the bridge, massive iron gears turned and creaked, making the ground vibrate. The closest gears were easily three times my height; some were even larger. It was like being inside a giant clock, and the noise was deafening.

We must be under Machina's fortress, I thought, gazing around in awe. *Wonder what those huge gears are for?*

There was a tug on my arm, and I turned to see the lead pack rat point across the bridge, his jabbering lost in the grinding noise of the room. I understood. They had taken me as far as they could go. Now the last part of the trek would be on my own.

I nodded to show I understood and started forward, when he grabbed my hand. Holding my wrist, he beckoned to his pack rats, chattering at them. Two waddled forward, reaching back for some item on their humps.

"It's okay," I told them. "I don't need any—"

My voice died away. The first pack rat drew out a long sheath with a familiar hilt, gleaming blue-black in the darkness. I caught my breath. "Is that…?"

He handed it over solemnly. Grasping the hilt, I pulled the blade free, washing the chamber in pale blue light. Steam writhed on the edge of Ash's blade, and a lump caught in my throat.

Oh, Ash.

I sheathed the blade and fastened it around my waist, grimly tightening the belt. "I appreciate this," I told the pack rats, unsure if they understood. They chattered at me and still didn't move, and the leader pointed at the

second, smaller pack rat who'd approached. He blinked and reached back, drawing forward a slightly battered bow and—

For the second time, my heart stopped. The pack rat held up the Witchwood arrow, slimy and covered with oil, but otherwise intact. I took it reverently, my mind spinning. They could have given it to Ferrum, but they hadn't, saving it for me all this time. The arrow pulsed in my hands, still alive and deadly.

I didn't think. I dropped to my knees and hugged the pack rats, both the leader and the small one. They squeaked in surprise. Their lumps poked my skin, making it impossible to get my arms around them completely, but I didn't care. When I rose, I thought the leader was blushing, though it was difficult to see in the darkness, and the small one grinned from ear to ear.

"Thank you," I said, putting as much sincerity into my voice as I could. "Really, 'thank you' isn't enough, but it's all I have. You guys are amazing."

They jabbered at me and patted my hands. I wished I knew what they were saying. Then, with a sharp bark from the leader, they turned and faded into the tunnels. The small one looked back once, his eyes bright in the gloom, and then they were gone.

I straightened, tucking the arrow into my belt much as Ash had done. Gripping the bow, and with Ash's sword hanging from my waist, I stepped beneath Machina's tower.

* * *

I FOLLOWED THE WALKWAY, which turned from stone to iron grating, through the giant maze of clockwork, setting my teeth against the grinding of metal on metal. I found a twisting iron staircase and followed it up to a trapdoor, which opened with a ringing bang. I winced and peeked out cautiously.

Nothing. The room I stared into was empty, save for the enormous boiler ovens that glowed red and filled the air with hissing steam.

"All right," I muttered, climbing out of the floor. My face and shirt were already drenched with sweat from the shimmering heat. "I'm inside. Where to now, I wonder?"

Up.

The thought came unbidden, and yet I knew it was right. Machina, and Ethan, would be at the top of the tower.

Clanking footsteps caught my attention, and I ducked behind one of the boilers, ignoring the searing heat radiating from the metal. Several figures entered the room, short and stocky and dressed in bulky canvas suits like firemen. They wore breathing apparatus that covered their entire faces, a pair of tubes snaking from the mouth to some kind of tank on their back. They stomped among the boilers, pinging on them with wrenches, checking the numerous pipes and valves. A large ring of keys dangled from each of their belts, jingling as they moved. As I scrambled back to an isolated corner, an idea floated to mind.

I followed them, staying hidden in the steam and shadows, observing how they worked. The workers didn't converse or speak to one another, being too caught up in their own work, which suited me fine. One broke off from the rest of the group, which paid him no attention as he wandered off into the steam. I trailed him down a hallway made of pipes, watching as he bent to check a hissing crack in the metal, and snuck up behind him.

Drawing Ash's sword, I waited until he turned around before stepping up and pressing the point of the blade against his chest. The worker jumped and scuttled backward, but the network of pipes trapped him between me and the exit. I stepped forward and angled the blade at his throat.

"Don't move," I snarled as fiercely as I could. He nodded and held up his gloved hands. My heart pounded, but I rushed on, poking at him with the blade. "Do exactly as I say and I won't kill you, all right? Take off your suit."

He obeyed, shedding his outer clothes and taking off the mask, revealing a sweaty little man with a thick black beard. A dwarf, and an ordinary-looking one at that; no steel skin, no cables coming out of his head, nothing to mark him as an iron fey. He glared at me with coal-black eyes, his arms rippling with muscle, and broke into a sneer.

"Come at last, have you?" He spat on the ground near a pipe, where it sizzled noisily. "We were all wondering what route you'd end up taking. Well, if you're going to kill me, girl, get it over with."

"I'm not here to kill anyone," I said carefully, keeping the sword trained on him as I'd seen Ash do. "I'm only here for my brother."

The dwarf snorted. “He’s upstairs in the throne room with Machina. Top west tower. Good luck getting to him.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re being awfully helpful. Why should I believe you?”

“Bah, we don’t care about Machina or your whiny brother, girl.” The dwarf hawked and spat on a pipe, where it bubbled like acid. “Our job is to keep this place running, not play court with a bunch of snotty aristocrats. Machina’s business is his own, and I’ll ask you to keep me out of it.”

“So, you’re not going to stop me?”

“Do you have lead in your ears? I don’t care what you do, girl! So kill me or leave me the hell alone, would you? I won’t get in your way, if you don’t get in mine.”

“All right.” I lowered the sword. “But I’ll need your suit.”

“Fine, take it.” The dwarf kicked it toward me with a steel-toed boot. “We’ve got several. Now, can I get back to work, or do you have more inane demands to keep me from my job?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I couldn’t leave him running loose. No matter what he said, he could tell the other workers, and I was pretty sure I couldn’t fight off all of them. I looked around and saw another trapdoor, like the one I’d come up from a few feet away.

I pointed at it with the sword. “Open that and get down there.”

“Into the Cogworks?”

“Leave your boots. And your keys.”

He glowered, and I raised my sword, ready to slash if he lunged at me. But the dwarf growled a curse, stalked over to the metal grate, and shoved a key into the lock. Pushing it open with a bang, he wrenched off his boots and stomped down the twisting staircase, making it ring with every step. With the dwarf glaring up at me, I shut the door and locked it, ignoring the guilt that gnawed my insides.

I dressed in the dwarf’s suit, which was hot and heavy and reeked of sweat. I gagged as I slipped it on. It was too short, but between the suit’s bagginess and my skinny frame, I made it work. My calves stuck out of the pant legs, but I shoved my sneakers into the dwarf’s boots and it wasn’t so noticeable. At least, I hoped it wasn’t. I heaved the tank onto my back, finding it surprisingly light, and put on the mask. Cool, sweet air hit my face, and I sighed in relief.

Now the only problem was the sword and the bow. I figured the workmen of the tower didn't stomp around with weapons, so I found a piece of canvas and wrapped them up in it, tucking it under my arm. The Witchwood arrow was still secured to my belt inside the suit.

Heart pounding, I returned to the boiler room, where the other dwarfs were shuffling out in a broken line. Taking a deep breath to calm my twisting stomach, I joined them, keeping my head down and not making eye contact. No one paid any attention to me, and I followed them up a long flight of stairs, until we reached the main tower.

* * *

MACHINA'S FORTRESS WAS HUGE, metallic, and sharp. Thorned creepers crawled over the ramparts, their barbs made of metal. Jagged shards jutted away from the walls for no apparent reason. Everything was harsh lines and sharp edges, even the fey that lived here. Besides the ever-present gremlins, I saw more armored knights, hounds made of clockwork, and creatures that looked like metallic praying mantises, their bladed arms and silvery antennae glinting in the dim light.

The dwarfs scattered as they left the staircase, breaking away in little groups of twos and threes. I drifted away from the rapidly diminishing crowd and followed the wall, trying to look as if I had a purpose. Gremlins scuttled along the walls, chasing one another and tormenting the other fey. Computer mice with tiny ears, feet, and blinking red eyes scurried away as I approached. Once, a gremlin landed on one, eliciting a high-pitched squeak, before stuffing the tiny creature into its mouth and crunching the sparks. It grinned at me, the mouse's tail hanging between its pointed teeth, and scuttled off again. Wrinkling my nose, I continued walking.

At last I discovered a staircase, spiraling up hundreds of feet along the tower walls. Gazing up at the infinite number of stairs, I felt a pull in my stomach. This was the one. Ethan was up there. And Machina.

I felt a pain in my heart, as if there was something…someone else I should remember. But the memory skipped away, out of reach. With my heart fluttering around my ribs like a crazed bat, I started the last leg of my journey.

There were small, narrow windows every twenty steps up the stairs. I peered out once and saw the open sky, with strange glittering birds soaring

on the wind. At the top of the stairs stood an iron door, bearing the insignia of a barbed crown. I quickly shed the dwarf's clothing, relieved to be out of the bulky, smelly garments. Taking off the bow, I carefully fit the Witchwood arrow to the string. When the arrow was nocked, it began to throb even faster, as if its heartbeat raced in excitement.

And, standing at the last door in the Iron King's tower, I hesitated. Could I really do this, kill a living creature? I wasn't a warrior like Ash or a brilliant trickster like Puck. I wasn't smart like Grim, and I certainly didn't have the power of my father, Oberon. I was just me, Meghan Chase, an ordinary high school student. Nothing special.

No. The voice in my head was mine, and it wasn't. *You're more than that. You're the daughter of Oberon and Melissa Chase. You're the key to preventing a faery war. Friend of Puck; sister to Ethan; beloved of Ash: you are much more than you think. You have everything you need. All that is left is to step forward.*

Step forward. I could do that. Taking a deep breath, I pushed the door open.

I stood at the entrance of an enormous garden, the door creaking as it swung away from me. The smooth iron walls surrounding me were topped with jagged spines, silhouetted black against the open sky. Trees lined a stony path, but they were all made of metal, their branches twisted and sharp. Birds watched me from the steel limbs. When they fluttered their wings, it sounded like knives scraping against one another.

In the center of the garden, where all the paths converged, a fountain stood. Made not of marble or plaster, but of different-size gearheads, turning sluggishly with the water's flow. I squinted and looked closer. On the bottom cog, lying on his back as the gear slowly spun him around, was a figure.

It was Ash.

I didn't scream his name. I didn't run to him, though every fiber in my body was telling me to do so. Forcing myself to be calm, I looked around the garden, wary of traps and sudden ambushes. But there weren't many places for attackers to hide; except for the metal trees and a few thorny vines, the garden seemed empty.

Only when I'd made sure I was alone did I sprint across the stony ground to the fountain.

Don’t be dead. Please, don’t be dead. My heart plummeted when I saw him. He’d been chained to the cog, wrapped in metal links, spinning round and round in an endless circle. One leg dangled over the edge; the other was folded beneath him. His shirt had been ripped to shreds, the skin a shocking contrast of pale flesh and vivid red claw marks. The flesh where the chains touched him was raw and crimson. He didn’t appear to be breathing.

Hands trembling, I drew the sword. The first slash shattered most of the links, the second cracked the gearhead nearly in two. The chains slid away, and the cog squealed as it ground to a halt. I dropped the blade and pulled Ash off the fountain, his body limp and cold in my arms.

“Ash.” I cradled him in my lap, beyond tears, beyond anything but an awful, yawning emptiness. “Ash, come on.” I shook him a little. “Don’t do this to me. Open your eyes. Wake up. Please…”

His body was limp, unresponsive. I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood, and buried my face in his neck. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, and now I did start to cry. Tears ran from my closed eyelids and down his clammy skin. “I’m so sorry. I wish you hadn’t come. I wish I never agreed to that stupid contract. This is my fault, all of it. Puck and the dryad and Grim, and now you—” It was getting hard to speak, my voice was so choked with tears. “I’m sorry,” I murmured again, for lack of anything else to say. “Sorry, so sorry—”

Something fluttered under my cheek. Blinking, hiccuping, I pulled back and looked at his face. The skin was still pale, but I caught a flicker of movement beneath his eyelids. Heart pounding, I lowered my head and brushed a kiss to his mouth. His lips parted, and a broken sigh escaped him.

I breathed his name in relief. His eyes opened and flickered to mine, confused, as if he wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or not. He moved his lips, but it was a few tries before anything came out.

“Meghan?”

“Yes,” I whispered immediately. “I’m here.”

His hand came up, fingers resting on my cheek, trailing down my skin. “I…dreamed you…would come,” he murmured, before his eyes cleared a bit and his face darkened. “You shouldn’t…be here,” he gasped, digging his fingers into my arm. “This…a trap.”

And then, I heard it—horrible, dark laughter, rising up from the wall behind us. The gears in the fountain shivered, then began to turn backward. With a loud clanking and grinding, the wall behind us sank into the ground, revealing another part of the garden. Metal trees lined the path to an enormous iron throne, spiking into the sky. A squadron of armored knights stood at the foot of the throne with weapons drawn, pointed at me. Another squad entered through the door and slammed it shut, trapping us between them.

Standing at the top of his throne, surveying us all with a look of grim satisfaction, was Machina, the Iron King.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Machina

The figure on the throne threw me a smile as sharp as razors. “Meghan Chase,” he murmured, his scintillating voice echoing over the garden. “Welcome. I’ve been expecting you.”

I gently laid Ash down, ignoring his protests, and stepped forward, shielding him behind me. My heart pounded. I didn’t know what I expected the Iron King to look like, but it wasn’t this. The figure on the throne stood tall and elegant, with flowing silver hair and the pointed ears of the fey nobility. He faintly resembled Oberon, refined and graceful, yet incredibly powerful. Unlike Oberon and the finery of the Summer Court, the Iron King wore a stark black coat that flapped in the wind. Energy crackled around him, like thunder with no sound, and I caught flashes of lightning in his slanted black eyes. A metal stud glittered in one ear, a Bluetooth phone in the other. His face was beautiful and arrogant, all sharp planes and angles; I felt I could cut myself on his cheek if I got too close. And yet, when he smiled, it lit up the whole room. A strange, silvery cloak lay across his shoulders, wriggling slightly as if it were alive.

I snatched the bow and arrow off the ground, bringing it to bear on the Iron King. This might be the only chance I got. The Witchwood pulsed in my hands as I drew back the string, aiming the tip at Machina’s chest. The knights shouted in alarm and started forward, but they were too late. I released the string with a yell of triumph, seeing it speed right on target, toward the heart of the Iron King.

And Machina’s cloak came alive.

Silvery cables unraveled with lightning speed, springing from his shoulders and spine. They spread around Machina like a halo of metal wings, wickedly barbed on one end, needle points glinting in the light. They whipped forward to protect the Iron King, knocking the Witchwood away, sending it flying in another direction. I watched the arrow strike a

metal tree and snap in two, fluttering to the ground in pieces. Someone screamed in rage and horror, and I realized it was me.

The guards rushed us, their swords raised, and I watched them come with a certain detachment. I was aware of Ash, trying to get to his feet to protect me, and knew it was too late. The arrow had failed, and we were about to die.

"Stop."

Machina's voice wasn't loud. He didn't scream or bellow the order, but every knight jerked to a halt as if pulled by invisible string. The Iron King floated down from his throne, the cables writhing slowly behind him like hungry snakes. His feet touched the floor, and he smiled at me, completely unconcerned with the fact that I had just tried to kill him.

"Leave," he told the knights without taking his eyes from me. Several of them jerked their heads up in surprise.

"My king?" stammered one, and I recognized his voice. Quintus, one of the knights who'd been with Ironhorse in the mines. I wondered if Tertius was here, too.

"The lady is uncomfortable with your presence," Machina went on, not looking away from me. "I do not wish her to be uncomfortable. Go. I will take care of her, and the Winter prince."

"But, sire—"

Machina didn't move. One of his cables whipped out, almost too fast to see, punching through the knight's armor and out his back. The cable lifted Quintus high in the air and threw him into the wall. Quintus clanged against the metal and slumped motionless to the ground, a jagged hole through his breastplate. Dark, oily blood pooled beneath him.

"Leave," Machina repeated softly, and the knights scrambled to obey. They filed out through the door and slammed it shut, and we were alone with the Iron King.

Machina regarded me with depthless black eyes. "You are as beautiful as I imagined," he said, walking forward, his cables coiling behind him. "Beautiful, fiery, determined." He stopped a few yards away, the cables settling back into that living cloak. "Perfect."

With a final glance at Ash, still slumped next to the fountain, I stepped forward. "I'm here for my brother," I said, relieved that my voice didn't tremble. "Please, let him go. Let me take him home."

Machina regarded me silently, then gestured behind him. A loud clanking began, and something rose out of the ground beside his throne, as if it was borne on an elevator. A large, wrought-iron birdcage came into view. Inside…

"Ethan!" I started forward, but Machina's cables whipped out, blocking my path. Ethan gripped the bars of the cage, peering out with frightened blue eyes. His voice rang shrilly over the courtyard.

"Meggie!"

Behind me, Ash growled a curse and tried to stand. I turned on Machina furiously. "Let him go! He's only a little kid! What do you want with him, anyway?"

"My dear, you misunderstand me." Machina's cables waved threateningly, moving me back. "I did not take your brother because I wanted him. I did it because I knew it would bring you here."

"Why?" I demanded, whirling on him. "Why kidnap Ethan? Why not just take me instead? Why drag him into all this?"

Machina smiled. "You were well protected, Meghan Chase. Robin Goodfellow is a formidable bodyguard, and I could not risk taking you without drawing attention to myself and my realm. Fortunately, your brother had no such protection. Better to draw you here, of your own volition, than risk the wrath of Oberon and the Seelie Court. Besides…" Machina's eyes narrowed to black slits, though he still smiled at me. "I needed to test you, make certain you were truly the one. If you could not reach my tower on your own, you were not worthy."

"Worthy of what?" Suddenly, I was very tired. Tired and desperate to save my brother, take him away from this madness before it consumed him. I couldn't win; Machina had us at checkmate, but I would get Ethan home, at least. "What do you want, Machina?" I asked wearily, feeling the Iron King step closer. "Whatever it is, just let me take Ethan back to our world. You said you wanted me. Here I am. But let me take my brother home."

"Of course," Machina soothed. "But first, let us make a deal."

I froze, everything going still inside me. A deal with the Iron King, in exchange for my brother's life. I wondered what he would ask for. Somehow, I knew it would cost me either way.

"Meghan, don't," Ash growled, pulling himself up by the fountain, ignoring the burns to his hands. Machina ignored him.

“What kind of deal?” I asked softly.

The Iron King stepped closer. His cables caressed my face and arms, making me shiver. “I’ve watched you for sixteen years,” he murmured, “waiting for the day you would finally open your eyes and see us. Waiting for the day you would come to me. Your father would have blinded you to this world forever. He is afraid of your power, afraid of your potential—a half-fey who is immune to iron, yet has the blood of the Summer King in her veins. *So* much potential.” His gaze lingered on Ash, finally on his feet, and dismissed him just as quickly. “Mab realized your power, which is why she wants you so much. Which is why she sent her best to capture you. But even she cannot offer what I can.”

Machina closed the last few steps between us and took my hand. His touch was cool, and I felt power humming through him, like currents of electricity. “I want you to be my queen, Meghan Chase. I offer you my kingdom, my subjects, myself. I want you to rule at my side. The oldbloods are obsolete. Their time is done. It is time for a new order to rise up, stronger and better than the ancient ones. Only say yes, and you will live forever, Queen of the Fey. Your brother can go home. I’ll even let you keep your prince if you wish, though I fear he may not adapt well to our kingdom. Regardless, you belong here, at my side. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted? To belong?”

I hesitated. To rule with Machina, to become a queen. No one would tease or mock me anymore, I would have scores of creatures ready to jump at my bidding, and I would finally be the one on top. I would finally be the most loved. But then I saw the trees, twisted and metallic, and remembered the terrible, barren wasteland in the wyldwood. Machina would corrupt the entire Nevernever. All the plants would die, or become twisted versions of themselves. Oberon, Grimalkin, Puck: they would fade away with the rest of the Nevernever, until only gremlins, bugs, and the iron fey remained.

I swallowed. And, even though I already knew the answer, I asked, “What if I refuse?”

Machina’s expression didn’t falter. “Then your prince will die. And your brother will die. Or, perhaps, I will make him one of my playthings, half human, half machine. The eradication of the oldbloods will begin with or without you, my dear. I am giving you the choice of leading it or being consumed by it.”

My desperation grew. Machina reached up and stroked my face, running his fingers down my cheek. “Is it really so terrible to rule, my love?” he asked, tilting my chin up to look at him. “Throughout millennia, both humans and fey have done it. Weeded out the weak to make room for the strong. The oldbloods and the iron fey cannot exist together, you know this. Oberon and Mab would destroy us if they knew about us. How is that any different?” He brushed a kiss over my lips, featherlight and vibrating with energy. “Come. One word, that is all you have to say. One word to send your brother home, to save the prince that you love. Look.” He waved a hand, and a great iron archway rose out of the ground. On the other side, I could see my house, shimmering through the portal, before it faded from view. I gasped, and Machina smiled. “I will send him home now, if you only say yes. One word, and you will be my queen, forever.”

I took a breath. “I—”

And Ash was there. How he could even stand, let alone move, was a mystery. But he shoved me aside, his face feral, as Machina’s eyebrows rose in surprise. The cables flared, stabbing toward Ash as the prince lunged forward and slammed his blade into Machina’s chest.

Machina staggered back, his face contorted with agony. Lightning crackled around the blade in his chest. His cables thrashed wildly, striking Ash and hurling him into a metal tree with a sickening crunch. Ash collapsed against the trunk as Machina straightened, giving him a look of white rage.

Reaching down, the Iron King grasped the hilt and pulled, sliding the blade out of his chest. Lightning sizzled, melting the ice around the hole, and thin wires wove themselves around the wound, knitting it together. Machina tossed the sword away and looked at me, his black eyes sparking with fury.

“I am losing patience with you, my dear.” One of his cables shot forward, coiling around Ash’s throat and lifting him off his feet. Ash choked and struggled weakly as Machina dangled him several feet overhead. Ethan wailed in his cage. “Rule with me, or let them die. Make your choice.”

I sank to my knees as my legs buckled, trembling. The stone floor was cold against my palms. *What can I do?* I thought desperately. *How can I choose? Either way, people will die. I can’t allow that. I won’t.*

The ground pulsed under my hands. I closed my eyes and let my consciousness flow into the earth, searching for that spark of life. I felt the trees in Machina's court, their branches lifeless and dead, but their roots and hearts uncorrupted. *Just like last time.* I gave them a nudge and felt them respond, writhing to meet me, pushing up through the dirt, like the trees of the Summer Court had for Oberon with the chimera.

Like father, like daughter.

I took a deep breath, and *pulled.*

The ground rumbled, and suddenly, live roots broke through the surface, pushing up through the pavement, snapping and coiling about. Machina gave a shout of alarm, and the roots flew to meet him, wrapping around his body, entangling the cables. He roared and lashed out, lightning streaking from his hands, blasting away the wood. Roots and iron cables twined around one another like maddened snakes, swirling in a hypnotic dance of fury.

Ash dropped from the cables, hitting the ground by a metal tree, winded and dazed but still trying to get to his feet, staggering after his weapon. I saw a strip of pale wood beneath the trunk—one half of the snapped Witchwood arrow—and lunged after it.

A cable wrapped around my leg, jerking me off my feet. I twisted around to see Machina glaring at me, his arm outstretched as he fought the web of roots. The cable tightened around my leg and dragged me toward him. I screamed and clawed at the ground, tearing my nails and bloodying my fingers, but I couldn't stop. The furious face of the Iron King loomed closer.

Ash's blade slashed down once more, cutting into the cable, severing it. More cables whipped toward him, but the Winter prince stood his ground, sword flashing as iron tentacles writhed around us.

"Go," he snarled, slashing the end of a cable out of the air. "I'll hold them back. Go!"

I leaped to my feet, rushing for the trunk and the arrow beneath. My hand closed over the wood and I spun back, only to see a cable slice through Ash's defenses and slam into his shoulder, staking him to the ground. Ash howled, swinging his sword weakly, but another cable knocked it from his grasp.

I charged the Iron King, dodging cables and snaking roots. For a moment, his attention was riveted on Ash, but then his gaze snapped to

me, lightning flashing in the depths of his eyes. Shrieking a battle cry, I lunged.

Just as I reached him, something slammed into my back, driving the breath from me. I couldn't move, and realized that one of the cables had stabbed me from behind. Strangely, there was no pain.

Machina drew me to him as roots and cables waged their war overhead. Everything else faded away, and there was just us.

"I would have made you a queen," he muttered, reaching a hand to me. The roots circling his torso, pinning his other arm, tightened around him, but he didn't seem to notice. "I would have given you everything. Why reject such an offer?"

My hand tightened on the Witchwood, feeling a faint beat of life still within. "Because," I whispered, raising my arm, "I already have everything I need."

I drove my arm forward, sinking the arrow into his chest.

Machina's lips gaped in a soundless scream. He arched his head back, still screaming, and green shoots erupted from his mouth, spreading down his neck. A strange pulse of energy, like an electrical jolt, coursed through my body, making my muscles spasm. The cable flung me away; I hit the ground and bit back a shriek as pain lanced up my spine. Clawing myself upright, I looked around, grabbed the sword, and rushed to Ethan's cage. One stroke of the ice blade smashed the door open, and I hugged my brother to me, feeling him sob into my hair.

"Meghan!" Ash staggered toward me, holding his shoulder, dark blood streaming down his skin. Behind him, the door burst open, and dozens of knights poured inside. For a moment, they froze in shock, staring at their king in the center of the garden.

Machina still writhed in his prison, but weakly. Branches grew from his chest, his cables turning into vines that bloomed with tiny white flowers. As we watched, he split apart, as the trunk of a brand-new oak burst from his chest, rising into the air. The Bluetooth phone dropped from the branches and lay, winking, at the roots of the tree.

"Wow," I whispered into the silence.

The knights turned on us with a roar. They rushed forward, but suddenly, the ground trembled. Rumblings filled the air as the iron throne began to collapse, shedding jagged shrapnel like scales. A tremor shook the ground, causing everyone to stagger.

Then, a huge chunk of the garden cracked and fell away, taking several knights with it into oblivion. More cracks appeared as the courtyard began to come apart. The knights howled and scattered, and screams rose into the air.

“The whole tower’s coming down!” Ash yelled, dodging a falling beam. “We have to get out of here, now!”

I ran to the iron archway, stumbling as more cracks slashed across the ground, and ducked through, only to reappear on the other side. Nothing happened. Despair rose up, and I gazed around wildly.

“Human,” said a familiar voice, and Grimalkin appeared, twitching his tail. I gaped at him, hardly believing my eyes. “This way. Hurry.”

“I thought you weren’t coming,” I gasped, following him across the garden to where two metal trees grew together, the trunks forming an archway between them. Grimalkin looked back at me and snorted.

“Trust you to take the hardest route possible,” he said, lashing his tail. “If you had only listened to me, I would have shown you an easier way. Now, hurry. This air is making me sick.”

A deafening roar shook the ground, and the garden crumbled away altogether. Clutching Ethan tightly, I dived between the trunks, Ash right on my heels. I felt the tingle of magic as we passed through the barrier, and realized I was falling, before everything went completely black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Homecoming

I awoke slowly, a hard tile floor cold against my cheek. Wincing, I sat up, testing my body for any lingering pain. I was vaguely aware that there should be some; I remembered Machina stabbing me through the back with his iron cables, felt the blaze of agony as he ripped them from my flesh—but there was no pain. In fact, I felt better than I had in a long time, my senses buzzing with energy as I gazed around. I lay in a long, dim room filled with desks and computers. The school computer lab!

With a jerk, I sat up and looked around for my brother, wondering, for one heart-stopping instant, if everything had been a horrible dream. A moment later, I relaxed. Ethan lay under a nearby desk, his face peaceful, his breath slow and deep. I brushed a stray curl from his forehead and smiled, then got to my feet.

Ash was nowhere to be seen, but Grimalkin lay on a desk beneath a dingy window, purring in the sunlight coming through the glass. Careful not to disturb Ethan, I rose and joined him.

“There you are.” The cat yawned, cracking open one golden eye to stare at me. “I was beginning to think you would sleep forever. You snore, you know.”

I ignored that comment, hopping up on the desk beside him. “Where’s Ash?”

“Gone.” Grimalkin sat up and stretched, wrapping his tail around himself. “He took off earlier, before you woke up. He said he had some things to take care of. Told me to tell you not to wait for him.”

“Oh.” I let that sink in, not knowing what to feel. I could’ve been upset, angry, resentful that he left so suddenly, but all I felt was tired. And a little sad. “He was hurt pretty bad, Grim. Will he be all right?”

Grimalkin yawned, obviously unconcerned. I wasn’t reassured, but Ash was strong: strong enough to make it all the way to the heart of the Iron Kingdom and back. A lesser faery would’ve died. He almost did die. Had

he been drawing glamour from me, in that desolate place? Or was it something else that enabled him to survive? I wondered if I'd ever get the chance to ask him.

After a moment, I turned to gaze around the room, marveling that the trod to the Iron Kingdom had been so close. Did one of the computers hide the path to Machina's realm? Had we come flying out of a monitor, or had we just blipped into existence, like the gremlins?

"So." I turned back to the cat. "You found us the path home. Congratulations. What do I owe you for this one? Another favor or life debt? My firstborn child?"

"No." Grimalkin's eyes slitted in amusement. "We will let this one go. This once."

We sat in silence for a bit, enjoying the sunlight, content just to be alive. Still, as I watched Ethan, sleeping under the desk, a strange heaviness filled me, as if I was missing something. As if I'd forgotten something vitally important, back in Faery.

"So," Grimalkin mused, licking his front paw, "what will you do now?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Take Ethan home, I guess. Go back to school. Try to get on with my life." I thought of Puck, and a lump rose to my throat. School wouldn't be the same without him. I hoped he was all right, and that I would see him again. I thought of Ash, and wondered if the prince of the Unseelie Court would consent to dinner and a movie.

"Hope springs eternal," the cat muttered.

"Yeah." I sighed, and we fell silent again.

"What I have been wondering," Grimalkin went on, "is how Machina kidnapped your brother in the first place. He used a changeling, yes, but that wasn't an iron faery. How did he make the switch, if it was not one of his own?"

I thought about it and frowned. "Somebody must've helped him," I guessed.

Grimalkin nodded. "I would imagine so. Which means Machina had normal fey working for him as well, and now that he is gone, they will be none too happy with you."

I shivered, feeling hope for a normal life slipping rapidly away. I imagined knives on the floor, my hair tied to the bedpost, missing items, and irate faeries lurking in my closet or under my bed, ready to pounce.

I'd never be able to sleep again, that much was certain. I wondered how I would protect my family.

A groan came from the sleeping form in the corner. Ethan was waking up.

"Go on, then," Grimalkin purred as I rose. "Take him home."

I wanted to say thank-you, but there was no way I was putting myself even more in the cat's debt. Instead, I went to gather Ethan, and we started across the room, weaving around desks and dark, silent computers. At the door, which was thankfully unlocked, I looked back to the window and the shaft of sunlight, but Grimalkin was no longer there.

The school halls were empty and dark. Puzzled, I made my way down the dingy corridors, clutching Ethan's hand and wondering where everyone was. Perhaps it was the weekend, but that didn't explain the dusty floors and lockers, the feeling of complete emptiness as we passed one locked classroom after another. Even on Saturdays, there would be at least one extracurricular class going on. It felt like the school had been empty for weeks.

The front doors were closed and locked, so I had to open a window. After hoisting Ethan up, I wiggled out after him, dropping to the pavement and gazing around. No cars stood in the parking lot, even though it was the middle of the day. The place looked completely deserted.

Ethan gazed around in silence, round blue eyes taking everything in. There was a wariness to him that seemed terribly out of place, like he was older now but his body remained the same. It worried me, and I gently squeezed his hand.

"We'll be home soon, okay?" I whispered as we started across the parking lot. "Just one short bus ride, and you can see Mom again, and Luke. Are you excited?"

He regarded me solemnly and nodded once. He didn't smile.

* * *

WE LEFT THE SCHOOL CAMPUS, following the sidewalk until we reached the nearest bus stop. Around us, cars sped by, weaving in and out of late-afternoon traffic, and people milled around us. Some older ladies smiled and waved to Ethan, but he paid them no attention. My concern for him knotted my stomach. I tried cheering him up, asking questions, telling him

little stories about my adventures, but he just stared at me with those mournful blue eyes and didn't say a word.

So we stood on the corner, waiting for the bus to come, watching the people surge around us. I saw faeries, slipping through the crowds, entering the little shops lining the street, following humans like stalking wolves. A fey boy with leathery black wings grinned and waved to Ethan from an alley across the street. Ethan shivered, and his fingers tightened on mine.

"Meghan?"

I turned at the sound of my name. A girl had come out of the coffee shop behind us, and was staring at me in amazement and disbelief. I frowned, shifting uncomfortably. She looked familiar, with her long dark hair and cheerleader-thin waist, but I couldn't remember where I knew her from. Was she a classmate? If so, I think I would have recognized her. She would have been very pretty, if it wasn't for the huge, distorted nose marring her otherwise perfect face.

And then it hit me.

"Angie," I whispered, feeling the shock punch me in the stomach. I remembered then: the cheerleader's mocking laughter, Puck muttering something under his breath, Angie's horrified screams. Her nose was flat and shiny, with two large nostrils that looked very much like a pig's. Was this faery vengeance? An awful sense of guilt gnawed at my insides, and I tore my gaze from her face. "What do you want?"

"Oh my God, it *is* you!" Angie gaped at me, nostrils flaring. I saw Ethan staring unabashed at her nose. "Everyone thought you were dead! There have been police and detectives looking for you. They said you ran away. Where have you been?"

I blinked at her. This was new. Angie had never spoken to me before, except to mock me in front of her friends. "I…How long have I been gone?" I stammered, not knowing what else to say.

"More than three months now," she replied, and I stared at her. *Three months?* My trek to the Nevernever hadn't taken that long, had it? A week or two, at most. But I remembered how my watch stopped while in the wyldwood, and a sick feeling rose to my stomach. Time flowed differently in Faery. No wonder the school was locked and empty; it was summer vacation by now. I really had been gone three months.

Angie was still staring at me curiously, and I floundered for a reply that wouldn't sound insane. Before I could think of anything, a trio of blondes heading for the coffee shop stopped and gaped at us.

"Oh my God!" one of them screeched. "It's the swamp slut! She's back!" Shrill laughter rang out, echoing over the sidewalk, causing several people to stop and stare. "Hey, we heard you got knocked up and your folks shipped you off to some military school. Is that true?"

"Oh my God!" one of her friends yelled, pointing to Ethan. "Look at that! She's already had her kid!" They collapsed into hysterical giggles, shooting me subtle looks to see my reaction. I gazed at them calmly and smiled. *Sorry to disappoint you,* I thought, seeing their brows knit with confusion. *But after facing homicidal goblins, redcaps, gremlins, knights, and evil faeries, you just aren't that scary anymore.*

But then, to my surprise, Angie scowled and took a step forward. "Knock it off," she snapped, as I recognized the blond trio from her old cheerleading squad. "She just got back to town. Give her a break already."

They shot her evil glares. "I'm sorry, Pigface, were you talking to us?" one asked sweetly. "I don't believe I was speaking to you at all. Why don't you go home with the little swamp bitch? I'm sure she can find a place for you on the farm."

"She can't understand you," another piped up. "You have to speak her language. Like this." She broke into a chorus of oinks and squeals, and the other two took up the cry. The street echoed with high-pitched grunts, and Angie's face flushed crimson.

I stood there, stunned. It was so weird, seeing the most popular girl in school standing in my shoes. I should've been happy; the perfect cheerleader was finally getting a taste of her own medicine. But my instincts also said this treatment wasn't new. It started the day Puck had pulled his cruel joke, and all I felt was empathy. If he were here, I would twist his arm until he changed her back.

If he were here…

I quickly pushed those thoughts away. If I kept thinking about him, I would start to cry, and that was the *last* thing I wanted to do in front of the cheerleaders. For a second, I thought Angie herself would burst into tears and flee. But, after a moment, she took a deep breath and turned to me, rolling her eyes.

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispered, jerking her head toward a nearby parking lot. “Have you been home yet? I can drive you, if you want.”

“Um…” Shocked again, I glanced down at Ethan. He gazed up at me, his face wan and tired. Despite my hesitation, I wanted to get him home as soon as possible. Though I still had my doubts, Angie certainly seemed different now. Briefly, I wondered if it was great adversity that made a person stronger. “Sure.”

* * *

SHE ASKED A LOT OF QUESTIONS on the drive home: where I had been, what made me leave, was it really a pregnancy that drove me off. I answered as vaguely as I could, leaving out the parts with the homicidal faeries, of course. Ethan curled up beside me and fell asleep, and soon his faint snores were the only sounds besides the hum of the engine.

Angie finally pulled up alongside a familiar gravel road, and my stomach twisted nervously as I opened the door, pulling Ethan out with me. The sun had gone down, and an owl hooted somewhere overhead. In the distance, a porch light glimmered like a beacon in the twilight.

“I appreciate the ride,” I told Angie, slamming the car door. She nodded, and I made myself say those two little words. “Thank you.” Guilt stabbed me again as I looked at her face. “I’m sorry about…you know.”

She shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I’m going to a plastic surgeon in a couple weeks. He should take care of it.” She went to put the car in gear, but stopped, turning back to me. “You know,” she said, frowning, “I don’t even remember how it got like this. Sometimes, I think I’ve always been this way, you know? But then, people look at me weird, like they can’t figure it out. Like they’re scared, because I’m so different.” She blinked at me, shadows under her eyes. Her nose seemed to leap off her face. “But you know what that’s like, don’t you?”

I nodded breathlessly. Angie blinked again, like she was seeing me for the first time. “Well, then…” Slightly embarrassed, she waved to Ethan and gave me a brisk nod. “See you around.”

“Bye.” I watched her pull away, her taillights growing smaller and smaller, until they rounded a corner and disappeared. The night suddenly seemed dark and still.

Ethan took my hand, and I looked down at him in concern. He still wasn't talking. My brother had always been a quiet kid, but this complete, brooding silence was disturbing. I hoped he wasn't too traumatized by his ordeal.

"Home, kiddo." I sighed, looking up the long, long driveway. "Think you can make it?"

"Meggie?"

Relieved, I looked down at him. "Yeah?"

"Are you one of Them now?"

I sucked in a breath, feeling as if he had punched me. "What?"

"You look different." Ethan fingered his ear, gazing up at mine. "Like the bad king. Like one of Them." He sniffled. "Are you going to live with Them now?"

"Of course not. I don't belong with Them." I squeezed his hand. "I'll live with you and Mom and Luke, just like always."

"The dark person talked to me. He said I'd forget about Them in a year or two, that I won't be able to see Them anymore. Does that mean I'll forget you, too?"

I knelt and looked him in the eye. "I don't know, Ethan. But, you know what? It doesn't matter. Whatever happens, we're still a family, right?"

He nodded solemnly, far too old for his age. Together, we continued walking.

* * *

THE OUTLINE OF OUR HOUSE grew larger as we approached. It looked familiar and strange all at once. I could see Luke's beat-up truck in the driveway, and Mom's floral curtains waving in the windows. My bedroom was dark and still, but a night-light shone out of Ethan's room, flickering orange. It made my stomach churn, to think what slept up there. A single light shone in the bottom window, and I picked up my pace.

Mom was asleep on the couch when I opened the door. The television was on, and she held a box of tissues in her lap, one twisted up in her fingers. She stirred when I shut the door behind me, but before I could say anything, Ethan wailed, "Mommy!" and flung himself into her lap.

"What?" Mom jerked awake, startled by the shaking child in her arms. "Ethan? What are you doing downstairs? Did you have a nightmare?"

She glanced up at me then, and her face went pale. I tried for a smile, but my lips wouldn't work right, and the lump in my throat made it hard to speak. She rose, still holding on to Ethan, and we fell into each other. I sobbed into her neck, and she held me tightly, her own tears staining my cheek.

"Meghan." At last, she pulled back and looked at me, a spark of anger warring with the relief in her eyes. "Where have you been?" she demanded with a little shake. "We've had the police looking for you, detectives, the whole town. No one could find any trace of you, and I've been worried sick. Where have you *been* for three months?"

"Where's Luke?" I asked, not really knowing why. Maybe I felt that he didn't need to hear this, that this was between me and Mom alone. I wondered if Luke had even noticed that I was gone. Mom frowned, as if she knew what I was thinking.

"He's upstairs, asleep," she replied, pulling back. "I should wake him up, tell him you've come home. Every night for the past three months, he's taken his truck down the back roads, looking for you. Sometimes he doesn't come home until morning."

Stunned, I blinked back tears. Mom gave me a stern look, the one I got right before I was grounded. "You wait right here until I get him, and then, young lady, you can tell us where you've been while we've been going crazy. Ethan, honey, let's put you to bed."

"Wait," I said as she turned away, Ethan still clinging to her robe. "I'll come with you. Ethan, too. I think everyone should hear this."

She hesitated, looking down at Ethan, but finally nodded. We turned to leave together, when a noise on the stairs froze us in our tracks.

The changeling stood there, his eyes narrowed, his lips peeled back in a snarl. He wore Ethan's bunny pajamas, and his small fists were clenched in rage. The real Ethan whimpered and pressed into Mom's side, hiding his face. Mom gasped, her hand going to her mouth, as the changeling hissed at me.

"Damn you!" it shrieked, stamping a foot into the ground. "Stupid, stupid girl! Why'd you have to bring him back? I hate you! I hate you! I __"

Smoke erupted from its feet, and the changeling wailed. Twisting in on itself, it disappeared into the smoke, shouting curses as it grew smaller and smaller, and finally vanished altogether.

I allowed myself a small smirk of triumph.

Mom lowered her hand. When she turned to me again, I saw understanding in her eyes, and a terrible, terrible fear. “I see,” she whispered, glancing at Ethan. She trembled, and her face was ashen. She knew. She knew all about Them.

I stared at her. Questions rose to mind, too jumbled and tangled to make out. Mom seemed different now, frail and frightened, not the mother I knew at all. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I whispered.

Mom sat on the couch, pulling Ethan up with her. He snuggled into her side like he was never going to let go. “Meghan, I…That was years ago, when I met…him…your father. I barely remember it—it seemed more like a dream than anything.” She didn’t look at me as she spoke, lost in her own world. I perched on the edge of the armchair as she continued in a faint voice.

“For months, I convinced myself that it hadn’t happened. It didn’t seem real, what we did, the things he showed me. It was just one time, and I never saw him again. When I discovered I was pregnant, I was a little nervous, but Paul was so happy. The doctors had told us we would never have children.”

Paul. My mind stirred uneasily at that name. It felt like I should recognize it. Then Mom’s words sank in and it hit me: Paul had been my father, or at least married to my mom. I didn’t remember him, not in the slightest. I had no idea who he was, what he looked like. He must’ve died when I was very young.

The thought made me sad, and angry. Here was another father that Mom had tried to hide from me.

“Then you were born,” Mom continued, still in that distant, faraway voice, “and strange things started happening. I’d often find you out of your crib, on the floor or even outside, though you couldn’t walk yet. Doors would open and close on their own. Items went missing, only to show up in the oddest places. Paul thought the house was haunted, but I knew *They* were lurking about. I could feel Them, even though I couldn’t see Them. It terrified me. I was afraid They were after you, and I couldn’t even tell my husband what was going on.

“We decided to move, and for a while, things were normal. You grew into an ordinary, happy child, and I thought everything was behind us. Then…” Mom’s voice trembled, and tears filled her eyes. “Then there was

that incident in the park, and I knew They had found us again. Afterward, after everything had died down, we came here, and I met Luke. You know the rest."

I frowned. I remembered the park, with its tall trees and little green pond, but I couldn't recall what "incident" Mom was talking about. Before I could ask, Mom leaned forward and gripped my hand.

"I wanted to tell you for so long," she whispered, her eyes wide and teary. "But I was afraid. Not that you wouldn't believe me, but that you *would.* I wanted you to have a normal life, not to live in fear of Them, to wake up every morning dreading that They had found you."

"Didn't really work, did it?" My voice came out hoarse and raspy. Anger simmered, and I glared at her. "Not only did *They* come for me, but Ethan got pulled in, as well. What are we going to do now, Mom? Run away, just like the last two times? You saw how well that worked."

She leaned back, hugging Ethan protectively. "I…I don't know," she stammered, wiping her eyes, and I immediately felt guilty. Mom had gone through the same things I had. "We'll think of something. Right now, I'm just glad you're safe. Both of you."

She gave me a tentative smile, and I returned it, though I knew this wasn't over. We couldn't stick our heads in the sand and pretend the fey weren't out there. Machina might be gone, but the Iron Kingdom would continue to grow, poisoning the Nevernever, little by little. There was no way to stop progress or technology. Somehow, I knew we couldn't escape them. Running away just didn't work—they were too stubborn and persistent. They could hold a grudge forever. Sooner or later, we would have to face the fey once more.

Of course, sooner came more quickly than I expected.

* * *

"ETHAN," MOM SAID AFTER a while, once the adrenaline had worn off and the house was still, "why don't you run upstairs and wake Daddy? He'll want to know that Meghan is home. Then you can sleep between us if you want."

Ethan nodded, but at that moment, the front door creaked open, and a cold breeze shivered across the room. The moonlight beyond the door shimmered, consolidating into something solid and real.

Ash stepped over the threshold.

Mom didn't look up, but Ethan and I jumped as my heart began to thud loudly in my chest. Ash looked different now, the cuts and burns healed, his hair falling softly around his face. He wore simple dark pants and a white shirt, and his sword hung at his side. Still dangerous. Still inhuman and deadly. Still the most beautiful being I'd ever seen. His mercury eyes found mine, and he inclined his head.

"It's time," he murmured.

For a moment, I stared at him, not understanding. Then it hit me all at once. *Oh, God. The contract. He's here to take me to the Winter Court.*

"Meghan?" Mom looked from me to the door, not seeing the Winter prince silhouetted against the frame. But her face was tight; she knew *something* was there. "What's happening? Who's there?"

I can't go now, I raged silently. *I just got home! I want to be normal; I want to go to school and learn to drive and go to prom next year. I want to forget faeries ever existed.*

But I gave my word. And Ash had upheld his end of the bargain, though he almost died for it.

Ash waited quietly, his eyes never leaving mine. I nodded at him and turned back to my family.

"Mom," I whispered, sitting on the couch, "I…I have to go. I made a promise to someone that I would stay with Them for a while. Please don't worry or be sad. I'll be back, I swear. But this is something I gotta do, or else They might come looking for you or Ethan again."

"Meghan, no." Mom gripped my hand, squeezing hard. "We can do something. There has to be a way to…keep Them back. We can move again, all of us. We—"

"Mom." And I let my glamour fade away, revealing my true self to her. It wasn't difficult this time, to manipulate the glamour surrounding me. Like the roots in Machina's domain, it came so naturally I wondered how I ever thought it hard. Mom's eyes widened, and she jerked her hand back, pulling Ethan close. "I'm one of Them now," I whispered. "I can't run from this. You should know that. I have to go."

Mom didn't answer. She kept staring at me with a mix of sorrow, guilt, and horror. I sighed and rose to my feet, letting the glamour settle on me again. It felt like the weight of the entire world.

“Ready?” Ash murmured, and I paused, glancing up toward my room. Did I want to take anything with me? I had my clothes, my music, little personal items collected in my sixteen years.

No. I didn’t need them. That person was gone, if she had been real in the first place. I needed to figure out who I really was, before I came back. If I came back. Glancing at Mom, still frozen on the couch, I wondered if this would ever be home again.

“Meggie?” Ethan slid off the couch and padded up to me. I knelt, and he hugged me around the neck with all the strength a four-year-old could muster.

“I won’t forget,” he whispered, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. Standing up, I ruffled his hair and turned to Ash, still waiting silently at the door.

“You have everything?” he asked as I approached. I nodded.

“Everything I need,” I murmured back. “Let’s go.”

He bowed, not to me, but to Mom and Ethan, and walked out. Ethan sniffled loudly and waved, trying hard not to cry. And I smiled, seeing their emotions as clearly as a beautiful painting: blue sorrow, emerald hope, scarlet love. We were connected, all of us. Nothing, fey, god, or immortal, could sever that.

I waved to Ethan, nodded forgiveness at Mom, and shut the door, following Ash into the silver moonlight.

* * * * *

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WINTER'S PASSAGE

Julie Kagawa

Meghan Chase used to be an ordinary girl…until she discovered that she is really a faery princess. After escaping from the clutches of the deadly Iron fey, Meghan must follow through on her promise to return to the equally dangerous Winter Court with her forbidden love, Prince Ash. But first, Meghan has one request: that they visit Puck—Meghan's best friend and servant of her father, King Oberon—who was gravely injured defending Meghan from the Iron Fey.

Yet Meghan and Ash's detour does not go unnoticed. They have caught the attention of an ancient, powerful hunter—a foe that even Ash may not be able to defeat….

An eBook exclusive story from Julie Kagawa's Iron Fey series.

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Chapter One

Keeping Promises

In the shadows of the cave, I watched the Hunter approach. Silhouetted black against the snow, it stalked closer, eyes a yellow flame in the shadows, breath coiling around it like wraiths. Ice-blue light glinted off wet teeth and a thick shaggy pelt, darker than midnight. Ash stood between the Hunter and me, sword unsheathed, his eyes never leaving the massive creature that had tracked us for days, and now, had finally caught up.

"Meghan Chase." Its voice was a growl, deeper than thunder, more primitive than the wildest forests. The ancient golden eyes were fixed solely on me. "I've finally found you."

* * *

My name is Meghan Chase.

If there are three things I've learned in my time among the fey, they are this: don't eat anything you're offered in Faeryland, don't go swimming in quiet little ponds and never, ever, make a bargain with anyone.

Okay, sometimes, you have no choice. Sometimes, you've been backed into a corner and you have to make a deal. Like when your little brother has been kidnapped, and you have to convince a prince of the Unseelie Court to help you rescue him instead of dragging you back to his queen. Or, you're lost, and you have to bribe a smart-mouthed, talking cat to guide you through the forest. Or you need to get through a certain door, but the gatekeeper won't let you through without a price. The fey love their bargains, and you have to listen to the terms *very* carefully, or you're going to get screwed. If you do end up in a contract with a faery, remember this: there's no way you can back out, not without disastrous consequences. And faeries *always* come to collect.

Which is how, 48 hours ago, I found myself walking across my front yard in the middle of the night, my house growing smaller and smaller in the background. I didn't look back. If I looked back, I might lose my

nerve. At the edge of the woods, a dark prince and a pair of glowing, blue-eyed steeds waited for me.

Prince Ash, third son of the Winter Court, regarded me gravely as I approached, his silver eyes reflecting the light of the moon. Tall and pale, with raven-black hair and the unattainable elegance of the fey, he looked both beautiful and dangerous, and my heart beat faster in anticipation or fear, I couldn't tell. As I stepped into the shadows of the trees, Ash held out a pale, long-fingered hand, and I placed my own in his.

His fingers curled over mine, and he drew me close, hands resting lightly on my waist. I lay my head against his chest and closed my eyes, listening to his beating heart, breathing in the frosty scent of him.

"You have to do this, don't you?" I whispered, my fingers clutched in the fabric of his white shirt. Ash made a soft noise that might've been a sigh.

"Yes." His voice, low and deep, was barely above a murmur. I pulled back to look at him, seeing myself reflected in those silver eyes. When I'd first met him, those eyes were blank and cold, like the face of a mirror. Ash had been the enemy, once. He was the youngest son of Mab, queen of Winter and the ancient rival of my father, Oberon, the king of the Summer Court. That's right. I'm half-fey—a faery princess, no less—and I didn't even know it until recently, when my human brother was kidnapped by faeries and taken into the Nevernever. When I found out, I convinced my best friend, Robbie Goodfell—who turned out to be Oberon's servant, Puck—to take me into Faeryland to get him back. But being a faery princess in the Nevernever proved to be extremely dangerous. For one, the Winter Queen sent Ash to capture me, to use me as leverage against Oberon.

That's when I made the bargain with the Winter prince that would change my life: help me rescue Ethan, and I'll go with you to the Winter Court.

So, here I was. Ethan was home safe. Ash had kept his side of the bargain. It was my turn to uphold my end and travel with him to the court of my father's ancient enemies. There was only one problem.

Summer and Winter were not supposed to fall in love.

I bit my lip and held his gaze, watching his expression. Though I had once viewed it as frozen solid, his demeanor had thawed somewhat during

our time in the Nevernever. Now, looking at him, I imagined a glassy lake: still and calm, but only on the surface.

"How long will I have to stay there?" I asked.

He shook his head slowly, and I could feel his reluctance. "I don't know, Meghan. The queen doesn't disclose her plans to me. I didn't dare ask why she wanted you." He reached up and caught a strand of my pale blond hair, running it through his fingers. "I was only supposed to bring you back," he murmured, and his voice dropped even lower. "I swore I would bring you back."

I nodded. Once a faery promises something, he's obligated to carry it through, which is why making a deal is so tricky. Ash couldn't break his vow even if he wanted to.

I understood that, but… "I want to do something before we go," I said, watching for his reaction. Ash raised an eyebrow, but otherwise his expression stayed the same. I took a deep breath. "I want to see Puck."

The Winter prince sighed. "I suppose you would," he muttered, releasing me and stepping back, his expression thoughtful. "And, truth be told, I'm curious myself. I wouldn't want Goodfellow dying before we ever resolved our duel. That would be unfortunate."

I winced. Puck and Ash were ancient enemies, and had already engaged each other in several savage, life-threatening duels before I was even in the picture. Ash had sworn to kill Puck, and Puck took great pleasure in goading the dangerous ice prince whenever he had the chance. It was only because I insisted they cooperate that they had agreed to an extremely shaky truce. One that wouldn't last long, no matter how much I intervened.

One of the horses snorted and pawed the ground, and Ash turned to put a hand on its neck. "All right, we'll check on him," he said without turning around. "But, after that I *have* to take you to Tir Na Nog. No more delays, understand? The queen won't be happy with me for taking this long."

I nodded. "Yes. Thank y— I mean…I appreciate it, Ash."

He smiled faintly and offered a hand again, this time to help me into the saddle. I gingerly picked up the reins and envied Ash, who swung easily aboard the second horse like he'd done it a thousand times.

"All right," he said in a faintly resigned voice, staring up at the moon. "First things first. We have to find a trod to New Orleans."

* * *

Trods are faery paths between the real world and the Nevernever, gateways straight into Faeryland. They can be anywhere, any doorway: an old bathroom stall, the gate to a cemetery, a child's closet door. You can go anywhere in the world if you know the right trod, but getting through them is another matter, as sometimes they're guarded by nasty creatures the fey leave behind to discourage unwanted guests.

Nothing guarded the enormous rotting barn that sat in the middle of the swampy bayou, so covered in moss it looked like a shaggy green carpet was draped over the roof. Mushrooms grew from the walls in bulbous clumps, huge spotted things that, if you looked closely enough, sheltered several tiny winged figures beneath them. They blinked at us as we went by, huge multifaceted eyes peering out from under the mushroom caps, and took to the air in a flurry of iridescent wings. I jumped, but Ash and the horses ignored them as we stepped beneath the sagging frame and everything went white.

I blinked and looked around as the world came into focus again.

An eerie gray forest surrounded us, mist creeping over the ground like a living thing, coiling around the horses' legs. The trees were massive, soaring to mind-boggling heights, interlocking branches blocking out the sky. Everything was dark and faded, like all color had been washed out, a forest trapped in perpetual twilight.

"The wyldwood," I muttered, and turned to Ash. "Why are we here? I thought we were going to New Orleans."

"We are." Ash pulled his horse around to look at me. "The trod we want is about a day's ride north. It's the quickest way to New Orleans from here." He blinked and gave me an almost smile. "Or were you planning to hitchhike?"

Before I could reply, my horse suddenly let out a terrifying whinny and reared, slashing the air with its forelegs. I grabbed for the mane, but it slipped through my fingers, and I tumbled backward out of the saddle, hitting the ground behind the horse, snapping bushes underneath. Snorting in terror, the fey steed charged off toward the trees, leaped over a fallen branch and vanished into the mist.

Groaning, I sat up, testing my body for pain. My shoulder throbbed where I'd landed on it, and I was shaking, but nothing seemed broken.

Ash's mount was also throwing a fit, squealing and tossing its head, but the Winter prince was able to keep his seat and bring it back under control. Swinging out of the saddle, he tied the horse's reins to an overhead branch and knelt beside me.

"Are you all right?" His fingers probed my arm, surprisingly gentle. "Anything broken?"

"I don't think so," I muttered, rubbing my bruised shoulder. "That lovely patch of bramble broke my fall." Now that the adrenaline had worn off, dozens of stinging scratches began to make themselves known. Scowling, I glared in the direction my mount had disappeared. "You know, that's the second time I've been thrown off a faery horse. And another time one tried to eat me. I don't think horses like me very much."

"No." Abruptly serious, Ash stood, offering a hand to pull me to my feet. "It wasn't you. Something spooked them." He gazed around slowly, hand dropping to the sword at his waist. Around us, the wyldwood was still and dark, as if the inhabitants were afraid to move.

I looked behind us, where the trunks of two trees had grown into each other, forming an archway between. The space between the trunks, where the trod lay, was cloaked in shadow, and it seemed to me that the shadows were creeping closer. A cold wind hissed through the trunks, rattling branches and tossing leaves, and I shivered.

With a frantic rushing sound a flock of tiny winged fey burst from the trod, swirling around us in panic and spiraling into the mist. I yelped, shielding my face, and Ash's horse screamed again, the sound piercing the ominous quiet. Ash took my hand and pulled me away from the trod, hurrying back to his mount. Lifting me to sit just behind the saddle, he grabbed the reins and climbed up in front.

"Hold on tight," he warned, and a thrill shot through me as I slipped my arms around his waist, feeling the hard muscles through his shirt. Ash dug in his heels with a shout, and the horse shot forward, snapping my head back. I squeezed Ash tightly and buried my face in his back as the faery horse streaked through the wyldwood, leaving the trod far behind.

* * *

We stopped infrequently, and when we did, it was only to let me and the horse rest for a few minutes. As evening fell, Ash pulled several food

items from the horse's pack and gave them to me; bread and dried meat and cheese, ordinary human food. Apparently, he remembered my last experiment with eating faery food, which hadn't turned out so well. I nibbled the dry bread, gnawed on the jerky and hoped he wouldn't mention the Summerpod incident and the embarrassment that followed.

Ash didn't eat anything. He remained wary and suspicious, and never truly relaxed the entire journey. The horse, too, was jumpy and restless, and it panicked at every shadow, every rustle or falling leaf. Something was following us; I felt it every time we stopped, a dark, shadowy presence drawing ever closer

As we rode on through the night, the eternal twilight of the wyldwood finally dimmed and a pale yellow moon rose into the sky. Ash and the fey horse both had seemingly unlimited endurance, more so than me, anyway. Riding a horse for hours and hours is not easy, and the stress of being chased by an unknown enemy was taking its toll. I struggled to stay awake, dozing against the prince's back, leaning dangerously off the sides until a jolt or sharp word from Ash snapped me upright.

I was dozing off once more, fighting to keep my eyes open, when Ash suddenly pulled the horse to a stop and dismounted. Blinking, I looked around dazedly, seeing nothing but trees and shadows. "Are we there yet?"

"No." Ash glared at me in exasperation. "But you keep threatening to fall off the horse, and I can't keep reaching back to make sure you're still on." He motioned to the front of the saddle. "We're switching places. Move forward."

I eased into the saddle and Ash swung up behind me, wrapping an arm securely around my waist, making my pulse beat faster in excitement.

"Hold on," he murmured as the horse started forward again. "We're almost to the trod. Once we're in the mortal realm, you can rest. We should be safe there."

"What's following us?" I whispered, making the horse's ears twitch back. Ash didn't reply for several moments.

"I don't know," he muttered, sounding reluctant to admit it. "Whatever it is, it's persistent. We've been keeping a pretty steady pace and haven't lost it yet."

"*Why* is it following us? What does it want?"

"Doesn't matter." Ash's grip around my waist tightened. "If it wants you, it'll have to get past me first."

My stomach prickled, and my heart did a weird little flop. In that moment, I felt safe. My prince wouldn't let anything happen to me. Settling back against him, I closed my eyes and let myself drift.

I must have dozed off, for the next thing I knew Ash was shaking me gently. "Meghan, wake up," he murmured, his cool breath fanning my neck. "We're here."

Yawning, I looked at the small glade ahead of us. Without the cover of the trees, I could see the sky, dotted with stars. The glade was clear, except for one massive gnarled oak in the very center. Roots snaked out over the ground, huge thick things that prevented anything bigger than a fern to flourish. The trunk was wide and twisted, like three or four trees had been squashed together into one. But even with the oak's size and dominating presence, I could see that it was dying. Its branches drooped, or had snapped off and were scattered about the base of the tree. Most of its broad, veined leaves were dead and brittle; the rest were a sickly yellow-brown. The glade, too, looked withered and sick, as if the tree was leeching life from the forest around it.

"It wasn't like this before," Ash murmured behind me. I gazed at the dying tree and felt an incomprehensible sadness, as if I were seeing an old friend about to die. Shaking it off, I looked around for a doorway or gate, but the tree was the only thing here.

"Will it still work?" I wondered as he urged the horse into the clearing, toward the ancient tree. "The trod, I mean. Will it open?"

"We'll see." Ash dismounted and led the horse up to the trunk. When it stopped, I slid out of the saddle and joined him.

"So, how does the trod work?" I asked, peering at the trunk for a door of some kind. Doors in trees were not unusual in the Nevernever. In fact, during my first time to Faeryland, I'd spent the night in a wood sprite's tree, somehow shrinking down to the size of a bug to fit through his door. "I don't see a gate. How do you get it to open?"

"Easy," Ash replied. "We just ask."

Ignoring my scowl, he faced the trunk and put a hand on the rough bark. "This is Ash," he said clearly, "third son of the Unseelie Court, requesting passage to the mortal realm and the clearing of the Elder."

"Please," I added.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a loud groaning and creaking, one of the massive roots snaked out of the ground, shedding dirt

and twigs. Rising into the air, it formed an archway between itself and the ground, and the space between shimmered with magic.

"There's your trod," Ash murmured, as my heart beat faster in my chest. Puck was through that gateway. If he was still alive.

Clutching Ash's hand, almost pulling him along in my impatience, I ducked through the arch.

I tripped over a root on the other side and stumbled forward, barely catching myself. Straightening, I gazed around the moonlit grove of New Orleans City Park, recognizing the huge mossy oaks from our last visit. The air was humid, warm and peaceful. Crickets buzzed, leaves rustled and moonlight shimmered off the nearby lake. Nothing had changed. It had been this peaceful the last time we were here, though my world had been falling apart.

Ash touched my arm and nodded at a tree, where a willowy girl with moss-green skin watched us from the shadow of an oak, her dark eyes wide and startled.

"Meghan Chase?" The dryad swayed toward us, moving like a wind-blown branch. "What are you doing here?" I blinked at the fear in her voice. "You must not stay!" she hissed as she drew close. "It is not safe. There is something dangerous following you."

"We know," Ash said beside me, calm and unflustered as always. The dryad blinked and shifted her gaze to him. "But we came through the Elder gate, so hopefully she won't let whatever is hunting us into this world."

Elder gate? I glanced behind me, and my stomach twisted so hard I felt nauseous.

It was the Elder Dryad's tree, the great oak that once stood tall and proud, looming over the others. Now, like its twin in the clearing, it was dying. Its branches were bare of leaves, the shaggy moss that covered it brown and dead.

A lump rose to my throat. I remembered the Elder Dryad from our first visit here: an old, grandmotherly fey with a soft voice and kind eyes who had given the very heart of her tree to make sure I could rescue my brother. And kill the faery who'd kidnapped him. The Elder had known she would die if she helped me. But she gave us the weapon we needed to take down the enemy fey and get Ethan back.

The dryad girl stepped beside me, gazing at the dying oak. "She lives still," she murmured, her voice like the whisper of leaves. "Dying, yes.

Too weak to leave her tree, she sleeps now, dreaming of her youth. But not gone, not yet. It will take a long time for her to fade completely."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"No, Meghan Chase." The dryad shook her head with a faint rustling sound, and a shiny beetle crawled across her face to burrow into her hair. "She knew. She knew all along what was going to happen. The wind tells us these things. Just as it tells us you are in terrible danger now." She suddenly fixed me with piercing black eyes. "You should not be here," she said firmly. "It is very close. Why have you come?"

My skin prickled, but I shook off the feeling of trepidation and held her gaze. "I'm here for Puck. I need to see him."

The dryad's expression softened. "Ah. Yes, of course. I will take you to him, but I fear you will be disappointed."

"It doesn't matter." I felt cold, even in the warm summer night. "I just want to see him."

The dryad nodded and shuffled back, swaying in the breeze. "This way."

Chapter Two

The Heart of the Oak

Puck, or the infamous Robin Goodfellow, as he was known in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, had another name, once. A human name, belonging to a lanky, red-haired boy, who had been the neighbor of a shy farm girl in the Louisiana bayou. Robbie Goodfell, as he called himself back then, had been my classmate, confidant and best friend. Always looking out for me, like an older brother. Goofy, sarcastic and somewhat overprotective, Robbie was…different. When he wasn't around, people barely remembered him, who he was, what he looked like. It was like he simply faded from their memories, despite the fact that whenever anything went wrong in school—mice in desks, superglue on chairs, an alligator in the bathrooms one day—Robbie was somehow involved. No one ever suspected him, but I always knew.

Still, it came as a shock when I discovered who he really was: King Oberon's servant, charged with keeping an eye on me in the mortal world. To keep me safe from those who would harm a half-human daughter of Oberon. But also, to keep me blind to the world of Faery, ignorant and unaware of my true nature, and all the danger that came with it.

When Ethan was kidnapped and taken into the Nevernever, Robbie's plans to keep me blind and ignorant unraveled. Defying Oberon's direct orders, he agreed to help me rescue my brother, but his loyalty came at a huge cost. During a battle with an Iron faery, a brand-new species of fey born from technology and progress, he was shot and very nearly killed. Ash and I brought him here, to City Park, and the dryads took him into one of their trees to sleep and heal from his wounds. Suspended in stasis, the dryads kept him alive, but they didn't know when he would wake up. If he woke up at all. We had to leave him behind when we left to rescue Ethan, and the guilt of that decision had haunted me ever since.

I pressed my palm against the mossy trunk, wondering if I could feel his heartbeat within the tree, a vibration, a sigh. Something, *anything*, that

told me he was still there. But I felt nothing except sap, moss and the rough edges of the bark. Puck, if he still lived, was far from my reach.

"Are you sure he's in there?" I asked the dryad, not taking my eyes from the trunk. I didn't know what to expect: his head to pop out of the wood and grin at me, perhaps? But I felt that if I took my eyes away for a second, I would miss something.

The dryad girl nodded. "Yes. He lives still. Nothing has changed. Robin Goodfellow sleeps his dreamless slumber, waiting for the day he will rejoin the world."

"When will that be?" I asked, running my fingers down the trunk.

"We do not know. Perhaps days. Perhaps centuries. Perhaps he does not want to wake up." The dryad placed her hand on the trunk and closed her eyes. "He is resting comfortably, in no pain. There is nothing you can do for him but wait, and be patient."

Unsatisfied with her answer, I pressed my palm against the tree and closed my eyes. Summer glamour swirled around me, the magic of my father Oberon and the Summer court, the glamour of heat and earth and living things. I prodded the tree gently, feeling the sun-warmed leaves and the life running through their emerald veins. I felt thousands of tiny insects swarming over and burrowing into the trunk, the rapid heartbeat of birds, dreaming in the branches.

I pressed deeper, past the surface, past the softer, still growing wood, deep into the heart of the tree.

And there he was. I couldn't physically see him, of course, but I could sense him, feel his presence in front of me, a bright spot of life against the heartwood. I felt the wood cradling his thin, lanky frame, protecting it, and heard the faintest *thump-thump* of a beating heart. Puck hovered limply, his chin on his chest and his eyes closed. He seemed much smaller in sleep, fragile and ghostlike, as if a breath could blow him away.

I drifted closer, reaching out to touch him, brushing insubstantial fingers over his cheek, pushing back unruly red bangs. He didn't stir. If I didn't hear his heartbeat, vibrating faintly through the tree, I would've thought he was already dead.

"I'm so sorry, Puck," I whispered, or maybe I just thought it, deep inside the giant oak. *"I wish you were here with me now. I'm scared, and I don't know what's going to happen. I really need you to come back."*

If he heard me, he didn't show it. There was no flicker of eyelids, no twitch of his head, responding to my voice. Puck remained limp and motionless, his heartbeat calm and steady, echoing through the wood. My best friend was far from me, beyond my reach, and I couldn't bring him back.

Depressed, feeling strangely sick, I pulled out of the tree, returning to my own body. As the sounds of the world returned, I found myself fighting back tears. So close. So close to Puck, and still so far away.

Ash's expression was grave as I met his eyes; he knew what I'd done, and could guess the outcome.

"He's still alive," he told me. "That's all you can hope for." I sniffed, turning away, and Ash sighed. "Don't worry too much about him, Meghan. Robin Goodfellow has always been extraordinarily difficult to kill." His voice hovered between irritation and amusement, as if he spoke from experience. "I can almost guarantee Goodfellow will pop up one day when you least expect it, just be patient."

"Patience," said an amused voice somewhere over my head, "has never been the girl's strong suit."

Startled, I looked up, into the branches of the oak. A pair of familiar golden eyes peered down at me, attached to nothing else, and my heart leaped.

"Grimalkin?"

The eyes blinked slowly, and the body of a large gray cat appeared, crouched on one of the lower branches. It *was* Grimalkin, the faery cat I met on my last journey to Faery. Grim had helped me out a few times in the past…but his help always came with a price. The cat loved collecting favors and did nothing for free, but I was still happy to see him, even if I still owed him a debt or two from our last adventure.

"What are you doing here, Grim?" I asked as the feline yawned and stretched, arching his fluffy tail over his back. True to form, Grimalkin finished stretching, sat down and gave his fur several licks before deigning to reply.

"I had business with the Elder Dryad," he replied in a bored voice. "I needed to know if she'd heard anything about the whereabouts of a certain individual." Grim scratched behind an ear, examined his back toes and gave them a lick. "Then I heard that you were on your way here, so I

thought I would wait, to see if it was true. You have always proved most entertaining."

"But…the Elder Dryad is asleep," I said, frowning. "They told me she's too weak to even come out of her tree."

"What is your point, human?"

"Never mind." I shook my head. Grimalkin was exasperating and secretive, and I learned long ago he wouldn't share anything until he was ready. "It's still good to see you, Grim. Wish we could stay and talk awhile, but we're in sort of a hurry right now."

"Mmm, yes. Your ill-contrived deal with the Winter prince." Grimalkin's eyes shifted to Ash and back to me, blinking slowly. "Hasty and reckless, just like a human." He sniffed, staring straight at Ash, now. "But…I would have thought that you knew better, Prince."

Before I could ask what he meant by *that*, I felt a hand on my arm and turned to meet Ash's solemn gaze. "We should go," he murmured, and though his voice was firm, his expression was apologetic. "If something is chasing us, we should try to make it to Tir Na Nog as soon as we can. It won't be able to follow us, then. And I can protect you better in my own territory than the wyldwood or the mortal realm."

"One moment." Grimalkin yawned and sidled down from the tree, landing noiselessly on the roots. "If you are leaving now, I believe I will come with you. At least part of the way."

"Really?" I stared at him, surprised. "You're going to Tir Na Nog? Why?"

"I told you before. I am looking for someone."

"Who?"

"You ask a wearying amount of questions, human." Grimalkin hopped down from the roots and trotted off, tail in the air. Several yards away, he glanced back over his shoulder, twitching an ear. "Well? Are you coming or not? If you say there is something after you, it would make sense not to be here when it comes to call, yes?"

Ash and I shared a bemused look and trailed after him.

The Elder Gate loomed before us, tall and imposing even though the tree was dying. As we approached, the entire trunk suddenly shifted with a groan. A face pushed its way out of the bark, old and wrinkled, part of the tree come to life. The Elder Dryad opened her eyes, squinting as though it was difficult to focus, and her gaze fastened on me.

“Noooooooooo,” she breathed, barely a whisper in the darkness. “You must not go back this way. *He* waits for you on the other side. He will…” Her voice trailed off, and her face sank back into the wood, vanishing from sight. “Run,” was the last thing I heard.

I shivered all the way down to my toes. Ash immediately took my hand and drew me away, striding in the opposite direction, his body tense like a coiled wire. Grimalkin slipped after us, a gray ghost in the shadows, the fur on his tail standing on end. It would’ve been funny if I didn’t feel eyes on the back of my neck, old, savage and patient, watching us flee into the night.

Ash paused beneath the limbs of another oak, put his fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle. Moments later, the fey horse trotted out of the shadows, snorting and tossing its head, skidding to a stop before us.

“Where are we going now?” I asked, as Ash helped me into the saddle.

“We can’t use the Elder Gate to get back,” the prince replied, swinging up behind me. “We’ll have to find another way into the Nevernever. And quickly.” He gathered the reins in one hand and snaked an arm around my waist. “I know of another trod that will take us close to Tir Na Nog, but it’s in a part of the city that’s…dangerous for Summer fey.”

“You are speaking of the Dungeon, are you not?” Grimalkin said, appearing suddenly in my lap, curled up like he belonged. I blinked in surprise. “Are you sure you want to take the girl there?”

“Not much choice, now.” Tightening his grip on my waist, Ash kicked the horse forward, and we galloped into the streets of New Orleans.

* * *

I’d forgotten what it was like to be a half faery in the real world, or at least in the company of a powerful, full-blooded fey. The horse trotted down brightly lit streets, weaving through cars and alleyways and people, and no one saw us. No one even glanced our way. Regular humans couldn’t see the faery world, though it was all around them. Like the two goblins sifting through a spilled Dumpster in an alley, gnawing on bones and other things I didn’t want to dwell on. Or the dragonfly-winged sylph perched atop a telephone pole, watching the streets with the intensity of an eagle observing her territory. We nearly ran into a group of dwarves leaving one of the many pubs on Bourbon Street. The short, bearded men shouted

drunken curses as the horse swerved, barely missing them, and galloped away down the sidewalk.

We were deep in the French Quarter when Ash stopped in front of a wall of stone buildings, old black shutters and doors lining the sidewalk. A sign swinging above a thick black door read: Ye Olde Original Dungeon, and there was red paint spattered against the frame in what was supposed to be blood, I guessed. At least, I hoped it was paint. Ash pushed open the door, revealing a very long, narrow alleyway, and turned to me.

"This is Unseelie territory," he murmured close to my ear. "There's a rough crowd that frequents this place. Don't talk to anyone, and stay close to me."

I nodded and peered down the closed-in space, which was barely wide enough to walk through. "What about the horse?"

Ash removed the horse's pack and pulled off its bridle, tossing it into the shadows. "It'll find its own way home," he murmured, swinging the pack over one shoulder. "Let's go."

We slipped down the narrow corridor, Ash in front, Grim trailing behind. The alley ended in a small courtyard, where a scraggly waterfall trickled into a moat at the front of the building. We crossed the footbridge, passed a bored-looking human bouncer who paid us no attention and entered a dark, red-tinged room.

From the shadows along the wall rose something huge and green, crimson eyes glaring out of the monstrous, toothy face of a female troll. I squeaked and took a step back.

"I smell me a Summer whelp," she growled, blocking our way. Up close, she stood nearly eight feet, with swamp-green skin and long, taloned fingers. Beady red eyes glared at me from her impressive height. "You're either really brave or really stupid, whelp. Lost a bet with a phouka or something? No Summer fey allowed in here, so get lost."

"She's with me," Ash said, stepping up to block the troll's line of sight. "And you're going to step aside now. We need to use the hidden trod."

"Prince Ash." The troll took a step back but didn't move aside completely. Facing a prince of the Unseelie Court, she turned almost sniveling. "Your Highness, of course I would let you in, but…" She glanced over Ash's shoulder at me. "The boss says absolutely no Summer blood in here unless we're going to drink it."

“We’re just passing through,” Ash replied, still in that same calm, cool voice. “We’ll be gone before anyone notices us.”

“Your Highness, I can’t,” the troll protested, sounding more and more unsure. She glanced back over her shoulder, lowering her voice. “I could lose my job if I let her through.”

Very casually, Ash dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“You could lose your head if you don’t.”

The troll’s nostril’s flared. She glanced at me again, then back at the Winter prince, claws flexing at her side. Ash didn’t move, though the air around him grew colder, until the troll’s breath hung in the air before her face.

Sensing her dire predicament, the huge faery finally backed off. “Of course, Your Highness,” she muttered, and pointed at me with a curved black claw. “But if she gets stuffed into a bottle and served as the next drink special, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Ash, and led me into the Dungeon.

The Dungeon, for all its eerie decor, turned out to be nothing more than a bar and nightclub, though it definitely catered to the more macabre crowd. The walls were brick, the lights dim and red, casting everything in crimson, and snarling monster heads hung on the walls over the bar. Music pounded the ceiling from an overhead room, AC/DC screaming out the lyrics to *Back in Black*.

There were human patrons at the bar and sitting throughout the room with drinks in hand, but I saw only the inhuman ones. Goblins and satyrs, phouka and redcaps, a lone ogre in the corner, drinking a whole pitcher of a dark purple liquid. Unseen and invisible, the Unseelie fey milled through the throng of humans, spitting in their drinks, tripping the drunker ones, stealing items from purses and wallets.

I shivered and drew back, but Ash took my hand firmly. “Stay close,” he murmured again. “This isn’t as bad as upstairs, but we’ll still have to be careful.”

“What’s upstairs?”

“Skulls, cages and the dance floor. Not something you want to see, trust me.” Ash kept a tight hold on my hand as we navigated around tables and bar patrons, moving toward the back of the room. Grimalkin had disappeared—normal for him—so it was just us receiving the cold, hungry glares from every corner of the room. A redcap—a short, evil faery with

sharklike teeth and a cap dipped in his victim's blood—reached for me as we passed his table, snagging my shirt. I tried to dodge, but the space was tight and narrow, and the clawed fingers latched onto my sleeve.

Ash turned. There was a flash of blue light, and a half second later the redcap froze, a glowing blue sword at his throat.

"Don't. Try. Anything." Ash's voice was colder than the chill coming off his blade. The redcap's Adam's apple bobbed, and he very slowly pulled back his claws. The rest of the Unseelie fey had frozen as well and were staring at us with glowing, hostile eyes.

"Meghan, go." Ash kept his threatening gaze on the rest of the crowd, daring anyone to get up. No one moved. I slipped past him and the redcap, who was keeping very still in his seat, and moved toward the back of the room.

"This way, human." Grimalkin appeared at the edge of a hallway, his eyes coming into focus before the rest of his body. Behind him, the narrow corridor was tight, dim and full of smoke. Strangely enough, bookshelves lined the walls, floor to ceiling—the type you'd find in a library or old mansion, not a shadowy bar in the French Quarter.

"Okay, why is there a library in the back of a goth bar?" I asked, peering around at the books. "Spell books for the black arts? Recipes for human hors d'oeuvres?"

Grimalkin snorted.

"Watch and learn, human."

At that moment, the bookshelf at the very end of the hallway swung open, and two college-aged girls walked out, laughing and giggling. I blinked and moved aside as they passed, reeking of smoke and alcohol, and stumbled back toward the main bar. Looking back, I caught a glimpse of the room behind the panel as it swung closed—a toilet, a sink and a mirror—and stared wide-eyed at Grimalkin.

"The *bathroom*?"

Grimalkin yawned. "What humans will not do to keep themselves entertained," he mused with half-lidded eyes. "It is even more amusing when they are drunk and cannot find the door. But I suggest we get moving. That redcap motley has taken quite an interest in you."

I looked back to see that the redcap had been joined by three of his friends, and all four faeries were staring at us and muttering among

themselves. Ash joined us in the hall, his icy blade still unsheathed, tendrils of mist writhing off it to mingle with the smoke.

"Hurry," he growled at us, pushing me toward the end of the hall. "I don't like the attention we're getting. Cat, have you opened the trod?"

"Give me a moment, Prince." Grimalkin sighed, and sauntered toward the panel that had so recently opened.

"Wait, aren't you their prince?" I wondered. "They're Unseelie too, right? Can't you just order them to leave us alone?"

Ash gave a low, humorless chuckle. "I'm *a* prince," he replied, still keeping an eye on the redcaps, who in turn were keeping an eye on us. "But I'm not the only one. My brothers are looking for you as well. Rowan has eyes and ears everywhere, I'm sure. He's much more ruthless than I am. Those redcaps could work for him, or they could be spies for Mab herself. Either way, they're going to inform *someone* of our passing the moment we leave this place. I can guarantee it."

"Sounds like a great family," I muttered.

Ash snorted. "You have no idea."

"Done," said Grimalkin from the end of the hallway. "Let us go."

"After you," Ash said, motioning me forward. "I'll make sure nothing follows us."

I slid the panel open, half expecting to see the tiny bathroom with the stained sink and toilet and scrawled-on walls. Instead, a cold breeze blew into the hallway, smelling of frost and bark and crushed leaves, and the gray, misty forest of the Nevernever stretched away through the door.

Grimalkin slipped through first, becoming nearly invisible in the fog. I followed, stepping through the doorway that became a split tree trunk on the other side. Ash ducked through and shut the door firmly behind us, where it faded into nothingness as soon as he let it go, leaving the mortal world behind.

It was colder in this part of the wyldwood. Frost coated the ground and the branches of the trees, and the mist clung to my skin with clammy fingers. I couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction. Everything was overly quiet and still, as if the forest itself was holding its breath.

"Tir Na Nog is close," Ash said, his voice muffled by the clinging fog. His breath did not puff or hang in the air like mine did. Trembling, I rubbed my arms to get warm. "We should move quickly. I want to get to Winter as fast as possible."

I was tired. My legs were cramped, both from riding and walking, my head hurt, and the cold was sapping the last of my willpower. And I knew from personal experience that it would only get colder the closer we got to Tir Na Nog.

Thankfully, Grimalkin noticed my reluctance. “The human is about to fall over from exhaustion,” he stated bluntly, twitching his tail. “She will only slow us down if we push her much farther. Perhaps we should look for a place to rest.”

“Soon,” Ash said, and turned to me. “Just a little farther, Meghan. Can you do that? We’ll stop as soon as we cross the border into Tir Na Nog.”

I nodded wearily. Ash took my hand, and with Grimalkin leading the way, we walked into the curling mist.

Minutes later, the howl rang out behind us.

Chapter Three

The Living Cold

Ash stopped, every muscle in his body coiling tight, as the echo of that eerie cry faded into the mist.

"Impossible," he murmured, his voice frighteningly calm. "It's on our trail again. How? How could it find us so quickly?"

Grimalkin suddenly let out a long, low growl, which shocked me and caused goose bumps to crawl up my arms. The cat had never done that before. "It is the Hunter," Grimalkin said, as his fur began to rise along his back and shoulders. "The Eldest Hunter, the First." He glanced at us, teeth bared, looking feral and wild. "You must flee, quickly! If he has your trail he will be coming fast. Run, now!"

We ran.

The woods flashed by us, dark and indistinct, shadowy shapes in the mist. I didn't know if we were running in circles or straight into the Hunter's jaws. Grimalkin had disappeared. Direction was lost in the coiling mist. I only hoped that Ash knew where he was going as we fled through the eerie whiteness.

The howl came again, closer this time, more excited. I dared a backward glance, but could see nothing beyond the swirling fog and shadows. But I could *feel* whatever it was, getting closer. It could see us now, fleeing before it, the back of my neck a tempting target. I stifled my panic and kept running, clinging to Ash's hand as we wove through the forest.

The trees fell away, the fog cleared a bit and suddenly a great chasm opened before us, wide and gaping like the maw of a giant beast. Ash jerked me to a stop three feet from the edge, and a shower of pebbles went clattering down the jagged sides, vanishing into the river of mist far below. The crack in the earth ran along the edge of the wyldwood for as far as I could see in either direction, separating us from the safety on the other side.

Beyond the chasm, a snow-covered landscape stretched away before us, icy and pristine. Trees were frozen, covered in ice, every twig outlined in sparkling crystal. The ground beneath looked like a blanket of clouds, white and fluffy. Snowdrifts glittered in the sun like millions of tiny diamonds. Tir Na Nog, the land of Winter, home to Mab and the Unseelie Court.

"This way." Ash tugged my hand and pulled me along the chasm, where the mist from the wyldwood rolled off the edge and down the cliff sides like a slow-moving waterfall. "If we can get to the bridge, I can stop him."

Panting, I followed the edge of the gorge and gasped in relief. About a hundred yards away, an arched bridge, made completely of ice, sparkled enticingly in the sun.

Something snapped in the woods at our right, something huge and fast. The Hunter was silent now, no howls or deep throaty bays; it was moving in for the kill.

We reached the bridge, and Ash pushed me forward onto the icy surface. There were no guards or handrails, just a narrow arch over a terrifying drop. Stomach clenching, I started across, trying not to look down. Because the bridge was ice, it was perfectly clear; I felt I was walking out over nothing, seeing the dizzying fall right beneath my feet.

My foot slipped, and my heart slammed against my ribs, pounding wildly as I flailed. Right behind me, Ash grabbed my arm tightly, and somehow we made it to the other side.

As soon as we were off, the Winter prince drew his sword. Sunlight flashed along the blade as he raised it and brought it slashing down on the narrow bridge. The bridge cracked, icy shards glittering as they spiraled into the air, and he raised the sword for another blow.

Across the chasm, something dark and monstrous broke out of the trees, fog swirling around it. Through the mist and shadows, I couldn't see it clearly, but it was huge, black and terrifying, with burning, yellow-green eyes. When it saw what Ash was doing, it roared, making the air tremble, then bounded for the bridge.

Ash brought his sword down again, then once more, and with a deafening crack, the ice bridge shattered. Our end slid away and dropped into oblivion, taking with it the entire arch, which clashed and screeched its way down the side of the cliff. The shadow on the other side slid to a

halt, green eyes blazing with fury as it stalked up and down the edge for a moment, panting. Then, with a snarl that showed a flash of huge white teeth, it turned and slipped back into the misty wyldwood, vanishing from sight.

I shuddered with relief and sank down into the snow, gasping, feeling as if my lungs and legs and whole body were on fire. But as the adrenaline wore off, I realized how frigidly cold it was on this side of the chasm. The icy wind cut through my bones and stabbed into me like a knife.

Ash knelt beside me and gently pulled me close, wrapping me in his arms. I leaned into him, felt his heart racing, and shivered against his chest. He was silent, resting his forehead against mine, saying nothing. Just there.

"Come on," he murmured after a few moments. "Let's find a place to rest."

"What about the Hunter?"

He rose, pulling me to my feet. "The Ice Maw runs for miles in either direction," he said, nodding at the chasm behind us, "until it meets the Wyrmtooth Mountains in the north and the Broken Glass Sea in the south. The Hunter won't find a way across for a long time. Besides," he added, narrowing his eyes, "this is *my* realm. I doubt he'll attack us here."

"Do not be too sure of that, Prince," said Grimalkin, popping into view on what was left of the shattered bridge. "The Hunter is older than you—much older. He does not care whose realm he is in when tracking his prey. If he is after you, you will see him again."

I sneezed, causing the cat to pin his ears. Ash took my elbow and drew me away from the chasm, positioning himself so that he blocked the wind howling up from the gap. "We'll worry about that if he ever gets across," the prince stated calmly as I hugged myself to conserve heat. "But night is coming, and so is the cold. We have to get Meghan inside."

"Before she turns into an icicle? I suppose." Grimalkin hopped off the shattered post, landing lightly in the snow. "The only shelter I know of is old Liaden's place in the frozen wood. Surely you are not taking the girl there?" He blinked under Ash's steady gaze. "You are. Well, this will be interesting. Follow me, then." He trotted away, making light paw prints in the snow, a fuzzy cloud gliding over the whiteness.

"Who's Liaden?" I asked Ash.

An icy gale howled up from the chasm before he could answer, slicing into me and tossing drifts of snow into the air. “Later,” Ash said brusquely, giving me a slight push. “Follow Grimalkin. Go.”

We trailed the paw prints into the woods. Icicles hung from frozen trees, some longer than my arms and as sharp as a spear. Every so often one would snap off and plummet to the ground with the tinkle of breaking glass. The cold here was a living thing, clawing at my exposed skin, stabbing my lungs when I breathed. I was soon shivering violently, teeth chattering, thinking longingly of sweaters and hot baths and burrowing under a thick feather quilt until spring.

The woods grew darker, the trees closer together, and the temperature dropped even more. By now I was losing feeling in my fingers and toes, the cold making me sluggish. I felt as if icy hands were grabbing my feet, dragging me down, urging me to curl up in a ball and hibernate until it was warm again.

A flash of color in the trees caught my eye. On the branch above me, a small bird perched on a twig, bright red against the snow. Its eyes were closed, and it was fluffed out against the cold, looking like a feathery red ball. And it was completely encased in ice, covered head-to-toe in crystallized water, so clear that I could see every detail through the shell.

The sight should have chilled me, but I was so cold all I felt was the spreading numbness. My legs belonged to someone else, and I couldn’t even feel my feet anymore. I tripped over a branch and fell, sprawling in a snowbank, ice crystals stinging my eyes.

I was suddenly very sleepy. My eyelids felt heavy, and all I wanted to do was lay my head down and sleep, like a bear through the winter. It was an appealing thought. I wasn’t cold anymore, just completely numb, and darkness beckoned temptingly.

“Meghan!”

Ash’s voice cut through the layers of apathy, as the Winter prince knelt in the snow. “Meghan, get up,” he said, his voice urgent. “You can’t lie here. You’ll freeze over and die if you don’t move. Get up.”

I tried, but it seemed a Herculean effort to even raise my head when all I wanted to do was sleep. I muttered something about how tired I was, but the words froze in the back of my throat, and I only grunted.

“The cold has her.” Grimalkin’s voice seemed to come from far away. “She is already icing over. If you do not get her up now, she will die.”

My eyelids were slipping shut, even though I tried keeping them open. If they closed, they would freeze and stay shut forever. I tried using my fingers to pry them open by force, but a layer of ice now covered my hands and I couldn't feel them anymore.

Give in, the cold whispered in my ear. *Give in, sleep. You'll never feel pain again.*

My eyelids flickered, and Ash made a noise that was almost a growl. "Dammit, Meghan," he snarled, grabbing both my arms. "I am not going to lose you this close to home. Get *up*!"

He rose, pulling me to my feet and, before I could even register what was going on, pressed his lips to mine.

The numbness shattered. Surprise flooded in, as my heart leaped and my stomach twisted itself into a knot. I laced my arms around his neck and kissed him back, feeling his arms around me, crushing us together, breathing in the sharp, frosty scent of him.

When we finally pulled back, I was breathing hard, and his heart raced under my fingers. I was also shivering again, and this time I welcomed the cold. Ash sighed and touched his forehead to mine.

"Let's get you out of the cold."

Grimalkin had vanished again, perhaps annoyed with our display of passion, but his delicate paw prints cut plainly through the snow. We followed them until the trail finally ended at a small, dilapidated cabin beneath two rotting trees. I wouldn't think anyone lived there, but smoke curled from the chimney and a dim orange light glowed through the windows, so someone must've been home.

I was eager to get inside, out of the biting chill, but Ash took my hand, forcing me to look at him.

"You're in Unseelie territory now, remember that," he warned. "Whatever you see in that room, don't stare, and don't make any comments about her baby. Understand?"

I nodded, willing to agree to anything if I could just be warm again. Ash released me, stepped onto the creaking, snow-covered porch, and knocked firmly on the door.

A woman opened it, peering out with tired, bloodshot eyes. A gray robe and cowl draped her body like old curtains, and her face, though fairly young, was lined and weary.

“Prince Ash?” she said, her voice breathy and frail. “This is a surprise. What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“We wish to spend the night here,” Ash stated quietly. “Myself and my companion. We won’t bother you, and we intend to be gone by morning. Will you let us in?”

The woman blinked. “Of course,” she murmured, opening the door wide. “Please, come inside. Make yourselves comfortable, poor children. I’m Dame Liaden.”

That’s when I saw her baby, cradled lovingly in her other arm, and bit my lip to stifle a gasp. The wrinkled, ghastly creature in a stained white blanket was the most hideous child I’d ever seen. Its deformed head was too large for its body, its tiny limbs were shriveled and dead, and its skin had an unhealthy blue tinge, like it had been drowned or left out in the cold. The child kicked weakly and let out a feeble, unearthly cry.

It was like watching a train wreck. I couldn’t tear my eyes away…until Ash nudged me sharply in the ribs. “Nice to meet you,” I said automatically, and followed him over the threshold into the room. Inside, a fire crackled in the hearth, and the warmth seeped into my frozen limbs, making me sigh in relief.

There was no crib anywhere in the cabin, and the woman didn’t put her infant down once, moving about the room clutching her baby as if she feared something would snatch it away.

“The girl can take the bed under the window,” Liaden said, wrapping the baby in another ratty, once-white blanket. “I fear I must go out now, but please make yourselves at home. There is tea and milk in the cupboards, and extra blankets in the closet. But midnight draws close, and we must depart. Farewell.”

Holding her infant close to her chest, she opened the door, letting in a blast of painfully cold air, and slipped out into the night. The door clicked behind her, and we were alone.

“Where is she going?” I asked, moving closer to the fireplace. My fingers were finally getting some feeling back, and were all tingly now. Ash didn’t look at me.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Ash…”

He sighed. “She’s going to wash her baby in the blood of a human infant to make her own child whole and healthy again. If only for a little

while.”

I recoiled. “That’s horrible!”

“You asked.”

I shuddered and rubbed my upper arms, looking out the cabin’s grimy window. Moonlight sparkled through the glass, and the land beyond was frozen solid. This was Unseelie territory, like Ash had said. I was far from home and family and the safety of a normal life.

Closing my eyes, I started to shake. What would happen to me once I reached the Winter Court? Would Mab throw me in a dungeon, or maybe feed me to her goblins? What would a centuries-old faery queen do to the daughter of her ancient rival? Whatever it was, I couldn’t imagine it would be good for me. Fear twisted my gut.

I felt Ash move behind me, so close that I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. He didn’t touch me, but his presence, quiet and strong, calmed me somewhat. Though the logical part of my mind told me he might be the one I should fear the most.

“So, how will this work?” I asked casually, trying to keep the accusation from my voice. It crept out anyway. “Am I a prisoner of the Winter Court? A guest? Will Mab toss me in a cell, or is she planning something much more interesting?”

He hesitated, and I could hear the reluctance in his voice when he finally spoke. “I don’t know what she intends to do,” he said softly. “Mab doesn’t share her plans with me, or anyone.”

“It’s going to be dangerous for me there, isn’t it? I’m Oberon’s daughter. Everyone will hate me.” I remembered the redcap’s hungry gaze and rubbed my arms. “Or want to eat me.”

His hands lightly grasped my shoulders, making my skin tingle and my heart flutter in my chest. “I will protect you,” he murmured, and his voice went even lower, as if talking to himself. “Somehow.”

Grimalkin appeared abruptly, leaping onto a stool by the fire, making me jump and Ash withdraw his hands. I mourned the loss of his touch. “Get some rest,” the Winter prince said, moving away. “If nothing else happens, we should reach the Winter Court by tomorrow night.”

Gingerly, I lay down on the bed beneath the window, trying not to imagine the last thing that used the mattress. Ash claimed a chair by the fire, turning it so he faced the door, and drew his sword into his lap.

Surprisingly, the bed was warm and comfortable, and I drifted off to the outline of Ash's profile keeping watch by the fire.

I must've woken sometime in the night, or perhaps I dreamed, for I remember opening my eyes to see Ash and Grimalkin standing before the hearth, talking quietly. Their voices were too low to hear, but the look on Ash's face was scary in its bleakness. He raked a hand through his hair and said something to Grimalkin, who nodded slowly and replied. I blinked, or maybe drifted off again, because when I opened my eyes again Grimalkin was gone. Ash stood with his hands braced on the mantel and his shoulders hunched, staring into the flames, and didn't move for a long time.

Chapter Four

The Hunter

"Get up."

The cold voice was the first thing I heard the next morning, cutting through layers of sleep and grogginess, bringing me fully awake. Ash loomed over me, his posture stiff, regarding me with empty silver eyes.

"We're leaving," he said in a flat voice, and tossed something on the bed, where it landed in a cloud of dust. A thick, hooded cloak, gray and dusty, as if all color had been leeched out of it. "Found that in the closet," Ash continued, turning away. "It should keep you from freezing. But we need to go, now. The sooner we reach the Winter Court the better."

"Where's Grim?" I asked, struggling upright, reeling from his sudden change in mood. Ash opened the door, letting in a blast of frigid air.

"Gone. Left early this morning." He waited, still holding the door, as I swirled the cloak around my shoulders. When I drew up the hood, the prince nodded briskly. "Let's go."

"Is something coming?" I asked, jogging after him through the snow, my breath puffing in the air. Everything was covered in a new layer of ice. "Is the Hunter getting close again?"

"No." He didn't look at me. "Not that I can tell."

I swallowed. "Did I…do something wrong?"

He hesitated this time, then sighed. "No," he said in a softer voice. "You did nothing wrong."

"Then why are you being like this? Ash? Hey!" I lunged forward and grabbed his sleeve, bringing us both to a halt.

"Let go." Ash's voice held the subtle hint of warning. I shook off my fear and stubbornly planted my feet.

"Or what? You'll kill me? Haven't you already made that threat?"

"Don't tempt me." But his voice had lost its coldness—now it just sounded tired. He sighed, raking his free hand through his hair. "It's not important. Just…something Grimalkin said. Something I already knew."

“What?”

He turned. “Meghan…”

In the distance, a howl echoed over the trees.

I jerked, and Ash straightened, his gaze sharpening. “The Hunter,” he muttered. “Again. How could it catch up so quickly?”

The howl came again, and I shivered, drawing closer to Ash. “What *is* it?”

The prince’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know. But this stops now. Come on!”

Ash kept a tight hold on my hand as we sprinted through the snow. I thought of the bridge and the impossible chasm that Hunter had, somehow, cleared, and hoped this plan would work out better. It didn’t seem likely that we would outrun whatever tireless beast was behind us.

The forest thinned, and jagged cliffs rose up on either side of us, sparkling in the sun. Huge blue and green crystals jutted out from the sides, sending fractured prisms of light over the snow. Ash led me through a narrow canyon, sheer cliff walls pressing in on either side until it opened up in a snowy clearing surrounded by mountains.

The howl rang out again, echoing eerily through the gully we had just come through. Whatever it was, it was closing fast.

“This way.” Ash tugged on my hand and pulled me toward the far side of the clearing. Between two pine trees, a dark blot in the cliff face marked the entrance to a cave, icicles dangling from the opening like teeth.

“Go,” Ash said, pushing me forward. “Get inside, hurry.”

I scrambled through the opening, being careful not to stab myself on the icicles, and straightened, looking around. The cave was huge, a vast, ice-covered cavern, sunlight slanting in through the holes in the roof far, far above us. The ceiling sparkled, every square inch covered with sharp, gleaming icicles, some longer than I was tall. A breeze howled through the cave, and the icicles tinkled like wind chimes, filling the cavern with song.

“Ash,” I said as the Winter prince came through the opening, shaking snow from his hair. “What—”

“Shh.” Ash put a finger against my lips, shaking his head in warning. He pointed to the skeletons scattered about the cave, half-buried in snow. The bones of some large animal lay sprawled on the ground nearby, a fallen icicle jutting through its ribs. I winced and nodded my understanding.

And then something black and monstrous exploded through the cave mouth, snapping at my face.

Ash jerked me backward, his hand snaking around my mouth to stifle my shriek, as the snap of teeth echoed inches from my head. If Ash's hand hadn't been pressed hard against my lips, I would've screamed again as two burning, yellow-green eyes peered at me from the face in the door.

It was a wolf, a huge black wolf the size of a grizzly bear, only longer and leaner and a thousand times more frightening. This wasn't the majestic creature you saw on the nature channels, loping through the snowy wilderness with its pack. This was the rabid beast in every horror movie about wolves: dark shaggy fur, slavering muzzle, glowing, pupil-less eyes. Its lips were curled back to reveal shiny fangs longer then my hand, and ribbons of drool dripped from its jaws, crystallizing in the snow. Only its head fit through the opening, but it turned its muzzle in my direction, and I swore it grinned at me.

"Meghan Chase. I finally found you."

Ash pulled me back farther, toward the far end of the cave, as the enormous wolf thrashed and wriggled in the doorway, somehow, impossibly, sliding through. My heart thudded as the creature rose to its full height inside the cave. He seemed to fill the chamber. Ash shoved me behind him, pressing me against the wall beneath a rocky overhang, and drew his sword. The wolf chuckled, the deep tone making my skin crawl, and bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"Think you're going to hurt me with that little thing?" His guttural voice echoed through the cavern, and icicles clinked above him, swaying dangerously. "Do you know who I am, boy?" He lowered his head, peeling his lips back. "I am *Wolf*. I am older than you, older than Mab, older than the most ancient faery to walk this realm. I was in stories long before the humans knew my name, and even then they feared me." He took one step forward, his huge paw sinking into the snow. "I am the wolf at the door, the creature that stalked the girl in the red hood to grandma's house. I am the wolf who becomes a man, and the man who is a beast inside. My stories outnumber all the tales ever told, and you cannot kill me."

"I know who you are." Ash's voice shook slightly, which chilled me even more. That Ash, fearless, unshakable Ash, was afraid of this thing filled me with dread. "But you're here for the Summer princess, and I have my own vow to bring her back to my court. So I can't let you take her." He

brandished his sword, the faery glamour of Winter swirling around him. “You’ll have to go through me first.”

The Wolf smiled. “As you wish.”

He lunged with a roar, jaws gaping wide, tongue lolling between dripping fangs. Insanely fast, he covered the area in a single bound and leaped at us, a dark blur in the air. I shrank back as the Wolf charged but Ash whirled, glamour snapping around him, and slammed his sword hilt into the wall.

A deafening crack echoed throughout the cavern, like a gunshot. The ceiling trembled, icicles clicking wildly and then, like a million china plates being smashed at once, collapsed in a deadly gleaming rain. The Wolf paused for an instant, looking up…and was buried under a ton of pointed crystal shards.

I turned away, covering my eyes as a single high-pitched yelp rose over the clatter of smashing ice. The snow cleared, the cacophony died away, and there was silence.

I started to peek through my fingers, but Ash grabbed my hand, blocking my view. “Don’t look,” he warned softly, and I saw a spatter of red behind him, seeping through the snow, making my stomach curl. “Let’s get out of here.”

Deliberately not looking at the dark mass in the center of the room, we fled the cave, scrambling through the hole back into the clearing. Snow was falling, light wispy flakes that danced on the breeze. I took a shaky breath, and the cold burned my lungs, reminding me I was still alive. I glanced at Ash, who was staring back at the cave mouth.

“The Wolf,” he murmured, almost to himself. “The Big Bad Wolf. Few ever live to tell of seeing him.” He shook his head in wonder, glancing back at me. “I wonder why he was after you? Who sent him, that he would track us this far?”

“Mab?” I guessed. Ash snorted and his lips curled in a smirk.

“Mab wants you alive,” he said, walking away from the cave mouth, back toward the gully. I pulled my hood up and hurried after him, jogging through the snow. “You’re no use to her dead. She was very specific about that. Besides, she wouldn’t put me at risk like that.” He paused, frowning slightly. “I think.”

He sounded terribly unsure. I felt a pang of sympathy, that Ash didn’t know if his queen, his own mother, would send the Wolf after us, not

caring if it hurt him. I closed the last few paces and reached out to touch his arm.

The Wolf's giant, bloody head lunged between us with a roar, knocking me back, sending me sprawling. Lightning quick, Ash drew his sword, a second too late. The monster's jaws clamped shut on his arm, and the Wolf hurled him away. I screamed.

"I told you, you can't kill me!" the Wolf snarled, stalking toward Ash, who had rolled to his feet with his sword in front of him. The thick, shaggy pelt was covered in blood. It dripped in a steady rain to the ground, raising faint puffs of steam where it struck the snow. Icicles stuck out of his body like a hundred jagged spears. Despite that, he moved smoothly, easily, as if he felt no pain.

"Foolish boy," the Wolf growled, circling Ash, leaving a crimson trail behind him. "You will not win this. I am immortal."

"Meghan, run," Ash ordered, his eyes never leaving the Wolf. His own blood dripped from his sword arm to stain the ground. "The Winter Court isn't far from here. You'll be protected—tell whomever you meet that Ash sent you. Run, now."

"I'm not leaving!"

"Go!"

The Wolf shook himself, sending blood, foam, and icicles flying. "I will deal with you momentarily, Princess," he growled, lowering himself into a crouch. Muscles bunched under his shaggy pelt, and the icicles gleamed as they stuck out of his thigh and bony ribs. "Are you ready, boy? Here I come!"

He leaped. Ash brought up his sword. And I charged the Wolf.

The Wolf hit Ash with the full weight of his body behind him, driving them both into the snow, ignoring the sword that slashed into him. His massive paws slammed into Ash's chest and arms, pinning the sword beneath them. They hit the ground with the Wolf on top, those huge jaws gaping wide to bite off Ash's head.

I slammed into the Wolf with every bit of strength I had, aiming for one of those gleaming ice spears, driving my shoulder into it. The sharp edge sliced into me, cutting my skin through the cloak, but I felt the spear jam farther into the Wolf's ribs. The huge creature let out a startled, painful yelp and swung around, pinning me with a blazing yellow glare.

"Foolish girl! What are you doing? I'm trying to help you!"

Shocked, I stared at him, panting. Still pinned beneath the Wolf, Ash tried to get up, but two giant paws held him down. “What are you talking about?” I demanded. “Let Ash up, if you say you’re helping me.”

The beast shook his head. “I was sent to rescue you and kill this one,” he replied, shifting his weight to better lean on Ash, who gritted his teeth in pain. “You are a prisoner no more, Princess. Just let me finish him off and you can return to the Summer Court.”

“No!” I lunged forward as the Wolf turned back, opening his jaws. “Don’t kill him! I’m not a prisoner. We made a deal, a contract—I would go to the Winter Court in return for his help. He’s not keeping me here by force. I *chose* this.”

The Wolf blinked slowly. “You made a contract,” he repeated.

“Yes.”

“A contract with this one.”

“Yes!”

“Then…your father was mistaken.”

“Oberon?” I stared at him, aghast. “Oberon ordered you to do this?”

The Wolf snorted. “No one orders me,” he growled, baring his fangs. “The Summer Lord thought you had been captured. He asked me to find you, kill your captor and free you to return to the Summer Court. He thought the hunt might be difficult, so deep within Winter’s territory, and I could not pass up the challenge.” The Wolf paused, scrutinizing me with intense yellow eyes, a flicker of irritation crossing his face. “However, if you have made a deal with the Winter prince, that changes things. The agreement with Oberon was to rescue you from your captor, and you do not have a captor. Therefore…” He snarled in annoyance and reluctantly stepped back, freeing Ash from beneath his paws. “I must honor the contract and let you go.”

He glared at us as he moved aside, the Hunter so close to his prey only to have it ripped from his jaws. I stepped between him and Ash, just in case the Wolf changed his mind, and helped the prince to his feet. Ash’s sword arm bleed freely, and the other was wrapped around his ribs, as if the Wolf’s weight had crushed them. Sheathing his blade, he faced our pursuer and gave a slight bow.

The Wolf nodded. “You’re very lucky,” he told Ash. “Today.” Backing off, he shook himself once more and glared at us with grudging respect. “It

was a good chase. Pray we do not meet again, for you will not even see me coming."

Throwing back his head, the Wolf howled, wild and chilling, making the hairs on my neck stand up. Bounding into the trees, his huge dark form vanished instantly, swallowed up by snow and shadows, and we were alone.

I looked at Ash in concern. "Are you all right? Can you walk?"

He took a step and winced, sinking to one knee. "Give me a moment."

"Come on." I slipped an arm under his shoulder and carefully eased him upright. The clearing looked like a war zone: trampled snow, crushed vegetation and blood everywhere. It could attract Unseelie predators, and though I was sure none were as scary as the Big Bad Wolf, Ash was in no shape to fight them off. "We're going back to the cave."

He didn't argue, and together we limped across the clearing to the ice cave, ducking inside. The floor was a mess of shattered icicles, making passage difficult and treacherous, but we found a clear space near the back of the room. Ash sank down against the wall, and I tore a strip off the hem of my cloak.

He was silent as I wrapped the makeshift bandage around his arm, but I could feel his eyes on me as I tied it off. Releasing his arm, I looked up to meet his silvery gaze. Ash blinked slowly, giving me that look that meant he was trying to figure me out.

"Why didn't you run?" he asked softly. "If you didn't stop the Wolf, you wouldn't have to come back to Tir Na Nog. You would have been free."

I scowled at him.

"I agreed to that contract, same as you," I muttered, tying off the bandage with a jerk, but Ash didn't even grunt. Angry now, I glared up at him, meeting his eyes. "What, you think just because I'm human I would back out? I knew what I was getting into, and I am going to uphold my end of the bargain, no matter what happens. And if you think I would leave you to that monster just so I wouldn't have to meet Mab, then you don't know me at all."

"It's *because* you're human," Ash continued in that same quiet voice, holding my gaze, "that you missed a tactical opportunity. A Winter fey in your position wouldn't have saved me. They wouldn't let their emotions

get in the way. If you're going to survive in the Unseelie Court, you have to start thinking like them."

"Well, I'm *not* like them." I rose and took a step back, trying to ignore the feelings of hurt and betrayal, the stupid angry tears pressing at the corners of my eyes. "I'm not a Winter faery—I'm human, with human feelings and emotions. And if you want me to apologize for that, you can forget it. I can't just shut off my feelings like you can. Though the next time you're about to get eaten or killed, I guess I won't bother saving your life."

I whirled to stalk away in a huff, but Ash rose with blinding speed and gripped my upper arms. I stiffened, locking my knees and keeping my back straight, but struggling with him would have been useless. Even wounded and bleeding as he was, he was much stronger me.

"I'm not ungrateful," he murmured against my ear, making my stomach flutter despite itself. "I just want you to understand. The Winter Court preys on the weak. It's their nature. They will try to tear you apart, physically and emotionally, and I won't always be there to protect you."

I shivered, anger melting away as my own doubts and fears came rushing back. Ash sighed, and I felt his forehead touch the back of my hair, his breath fanning my neck. "I don't want to do this," he admitted in a low, anguished voice. "I don't want to see what they'll try to do to you. A Summer faery in the Winter Court doesn't stand much of a chance. But I vowed that I would bring you back, and I'm bound to that promise." He raised his head, squeezing my shoulders in an almost painful grip as his voice dropped a few octaves, turning grim and cold. "So, you have to be stronger than they are. You can't let down your guard, no matter what. They will lead you on, with games and pretty words, and they will take pleasure in your misery. Don't let them get to you. And don't trust anyone." He paused, and his voice went even lower. "Not even me."

"I'll always trust you," I whispered without thinking, and his hands tightened, turning me to face him almost savagely.

"No," he said, narrowing his eyes. "You won't. I'm your enemy, Meghan. Never forget that. If Mab tells me to kill you in front of the entire court, it's my duty to obey. If she orders Rowan or Sage to carve you up slowly, making sure you suffer every second of it, I'm expected to stand there and let them do it. Do you understand? My feelings for you don't

matter in the Winter Court. Summer and Winter will always be on opposite sides, and nothing will change that."

I knew I should be afraid of him. He was an Unseelie prince after all, and had basically admitted he would kill me if Mab ordered him to. But he also admitted to having feelings for me—feelings that didn't matter, true, but it still made my stomach squirm when I heard it. And maybe I was being naive, but I couldn't believe Ash would willingly hurt me, even in the Winter Court. Not with the way he was looking at me now, his silver eyes conflicted and angry.

He stared at me a moment longer, then sighed. "You didn't hear a word I said, did you?" he murmured, closing his eyes.

"I'm not afraid," I told him, which was a lie; I was terrified of Mab and the Unseelie Court that waited at the end of this journey. But if Ash was there, I would be all right.

"You are infuriatingly stubborn," Ash muttered, raking a hand through his hair. "I don't know how I'm going to protect you when you have no concept of self-preservation."

I stepped close to him, placing a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beat under his shirt. "I trust you," I said, rising up so our faces were inches apart, trailing my fingers down his stomach. "I know you'll find a way."

His breath hitched, and he regarded me hungrily. "You're playing with fire, you know that?"

"That's weird, considering you're an ice prin—" I didn't get any further, as Ash leaned in and kissed me. I looped my arms around his neck as his snaked around my waist, and for a few moments, the cold couldn't touch me.

* * *

We spent the night in the cave, both to give Ash a chance to heal from his wounds and to give us one more night of rest before entering Tir Na Nog. It didn't take long for Ash to recover. The fey heal insanely fast, especially if they are within their own territories, and by the time darkness fell his bite wounds were almost gone. As the temperature dropped, he started a fire, solely for my benefit, and we sat around the flames sharing the last of the food, lost in our own thoughts.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, piling outside the entrance and in the center of the room through the holes in the ceiling. It sparkled in the icy moonlight, like flakes of diamonds drifting from the sky, tempting me to stand in the center of the light and catch them on my tongue.

Ash was silent through most of the evening. He'd broken the kiss earlier, pulling away with a guilty, agonized look, and mumbled something about making camp. Since then, he'd given me short, one-word answers whenever I tried talking to him, and avoided eye contact whenever possible.

He sat across from me now, chin on his hands, brooding into the fire. Part of me wanted to walk up to him and hug him from behind, and part of me wanted to hurl a snowball at his perfect face to get some kind of reaction.

I opted for a less suicidal route. "Hey," I said, poking at the flames with a stick, making them cough sparks. "Earth to Ash. What are you thinking about?"

He didn't move, and for a second I thought he would reply with his favorite one-word answer of the night: *Nothing*. But after a moment he sighed and his eyes flickered, very briefly, to mine.

"Home," he said quietly. "I'm thinking of home. Of the court."

"Do you miss it?"

Another pause, and he shook his head slowly. "No."

"But it's your home."

"It's the place I was born. That's all." He sighed and gazed into the fire. "I don't go back often, and I rarely stay at court for any length of time."

I thought of Mom, and Ethan, and our tiny little farmhouse out in the bayou, and a lump rose to my throat. "That must be lonely," I murmured. "Don't you get homesick once in a while?"

Ash regarded me across the flames, understanding and sympathy dawning in his gaze. "My family," he said in a solemn voice, "is not like yours."

He rose gracefully, abruptly, as if the subject had become tiring. "Get some sleep," he said, and the chill was back in his voice. "Tomorrow we reach the Winter Court. Queen Mab will be anxious to meet you."

My gut twisted. I curled up inside my cloak, as close to the fire as I dared, and let my mind go blank. I was certain that Ash's last words would

prevent me from getting any sleep, but I was more exhausted than I realized and soon drifted into oblivion.

* * *

That night, for the first time, I dreamed of the Iron King.

The scene was eerily familiar. I stood atop a great iron tower, a hot wind stinging my face, smelling of ozone and chemicals. Before me, a huge metal throne rose into the mottled yellow sky, black iron spikes raking the clouds. Behind me, Ash's cold, pale body was sprawled against the edge of a fountain, blood oozing slowly into the water.

Machina the Iron King stood at the top of his metal throne, long silver hair whipping in the wind. His back was to me, the numerous iron cables extending from his shoulders and spine surrounding him like glittering wings.

I took a step forward, squinting up at the silhouette on the throne. "Machina!" I called, my voice sounding weak and small in the wind. "Where's my brother?"

The Iron King raised his head slightly, but didn't turn around. "Your brother?"

"Yes, my brother. Ethan. You stole him and brought him here." I kept walking, ignoring the wind that tore at my hair and clothes. Thunder boomed overhead, and the mottled yellow clouds turned black and crimson. "You wanted to lure me here," I continued, reaching the base of the throne. "You wanted me to become your queen in exchange for Ethan. Well, here I am. Now let my brother go."

Machina turned. Only it wasn't the Iron King's sharp, intelligent face that stared down at me.

It was my own.

* * *

I jerked awake, my heart hammering against my ribs, cold sweat trickling down my back. The fire had gone out, and the ice cave lay dark and empty, though the sky showing through the holes was already light. Snow lay in huge glimmering piles where it had drifted in through the roof, and several new icicles were already forming on the ceiling, growing back like teeth. Ash was nowhere to be seen.

Still trembling from the nightmare, I rolled away from the dead campfire and stood, shaking snow clumps from my hair. Pulling my cloak tighter around myself, I went searching for Ash.

I didn't have to look far. He stood outside in the clearing, snow flurries drifting around him, his sword glowing blue against the white. From the sweeping footprints in the snow, I knew he'd been practicing sword drills, but now he stood motionless, his back to me, gazing toward the entrance of the gully.

I pulled up my hood and walked out, tromping through the deep snow until I stood beside him. He acknowledged me with a flick of his eyes, but otherwise didn't move, his gaze riveted to the edge of the canyon.

"They're coming," he murmured.

A group of horses appeared then, seeming to materialize out of the falling snow, pure white and blue-eyed, trotting a few inches above the ground. Atop them sat Winter knights in icy blue-and-black armor, their gazes cold beneath their snarling wolf helms.

Ash stepped forward, very subtly moving in front of me as the knights swept up, horses snorting small geysers from flared nostrils. "Prince Ash," one knight said formally, bowing in the saddle. "Her majesty the queen has been informed of your return and has sent us to escort you and the half-breed back to the palace."

I bristled at the term *half-breed* but Ash didn't seem terribly fazed by their arrival.

"I don't need an escort," he said in a bored voice. "Return to the palace and tell Queen Mab I will arrive shortly. I'm fairly capable of handling the half-breed by myself."

I cringed at his tone. He was back to being Prince Ash, third son of the Unseelie Court, dangerous, cold and heartless. The knights didn't seem at all surprised, which somehow made me even more apprehensive. This cold, hostile prince was the Ash they were used to.

"I'm afraid the queen insists, Your Highness," the first one replied, unapologetic. "By order of Queen Mab, you and the half-breed will come with us to the Winter Court. She is rather impatient for your arrival."

Ash sighed.

"Very well," he muttered, not even looking at me as he swung into an empty saddle. Before I could protest, another knight reached down and pulled me up in front of him. "Let's get this over with."

We rode for several silent hours. The knights did not speak to me, Ash, or each other, and the horse's hooves made no sound as they galloped over the snow. Ash didn't even look in my direction; his face remained blank and cold throughout the ride.

Completely ignored, I was left to my own thoughts, which were dark and growing more disturbing the farther we went. I missed home. I was terrified of meeting Queen Mab. And Ash had turned into someone cold and unfamiliar. I replayed our last kiss in my mind, clinging to it like a life vest in a raging sea. Had I imagined his feelings for me, misread his intentions? What if everything he'd said was just a ploy, a scheme to get me to Tir Na Nog and the queen?

No, I couldn't believe that. The emotion on his face that night was real. I had to believe that he cared, I had to believe in him, or I would go crazy.

Night was falling and a huge frozen moon was peeking over the tops of the trees when we came to a vast, icy lake. Jagged ice floes crinkled against one another near the shoreline, and fog writhed along the surface of the water. A long wooden dock stretched out toward the middle of the lake, vanishing into the hanging mist.

As I wondered how close we were to the Winter Court, the knights abruptly steered their horses onto the rickety dock and rode down single file, the dark waters of the lake lapping the posts beneath us. I squinted and peered through the fog, wondering if the Winter Court was on an island in the center.

The mist cleared away for just a moment, and I saw the edge of the dock, dropping away into dark, murky lake water. The horses broke into a trot, then a full gallop, snorting eagerly, as the end of the dock rushed at us with terrifying speed. I closed my eyes and the horses leaped.

We hit the water with a loud splash and sank quickly into the icy depths. The horse didn't even try to resurface, and the knight's grip was firm, so I couldn't kick away. I held my breath and fought down panic as we dropped deeper and deeper into the frigid waters.

Then, suddenly, we resurfaced, bursting out with the same noisy splash, sending water flying. Gasping, I rubbed my eyes and looked around, confused and disoriented. I didn't recall the horse swimming back up. Where were we, anyway?

My gaze focused, my breath caught and I forgot about everything else.

A massive underground city loomed before me, lit up with millions of tiny lights, gleaming yellow, blue and green like a blanket of stars. From where we floated in the black waters of the lake, I could see large stone buildings, streets winding upward in a spiral pattern and ice covering everything. The cavern above soared into darkness, farther than I could see, and the twinkling lights made the entire city glow with hazy etherealness.

At the top of a hill, casting its shadow over everything, an enormous, ice-covered palace stood proudly against the black. I shivered, and the knight behind me spoke for the first time.

"Welcome to Tir Na Nog."

I glanced at Ash and finally caught his gaze. For a moment, the Unseelie prince looked torn, balanced between emotion and duty, his eyes begging forgiveness. But a half second later he turned away, and his face shut into that blank mask once more.

We rode through the snow-laced streets toward the palace, and the denizens of the Unseelie Court watched us pass with glowing, inhuman eyes. We stopped at the palace doors, where a pair of monstrous ogres glared menacingly, drool dripping from their tusks, but let us through without a word.

Even within the palace, the rooms and hallways were coated with frost and translucent, crystal ice in various colors; it was possibly colder inside than it was outside. More Unseelie roamed the corridors: goblins, hags, redcaps, all watching me with hungry, evil grins. But since I was flanked by a group of stone-faced knights and one lethally calm Winter prince, none dared do more than leer at me.

The knights escorted us to a pair of soaring double doors carved with the images of frozen trees. If you looked closely, you could almost see faces peering at you through the branches, but if you blinked or looked away they would be gone. A chill wafted out from between the cracks, colder than I thought possible, even in this palace of ice. It brushed across my skin and tiny needles of cold stabbed into me. I shivered and stepped back.

The knights, I realized, were now standing at attention along the corridor, gazing straight ahead, paying us no attention. As I rubbed my stinging arm, Ash stepped close, not touching me, but close enough to

make my heart beat faster. With his back to the knights, he put a hand on the door and paused, as if gathering his resolve.

"This is the throne room," he murmured in a low voice. "Queen Mab is on the other side. Are you ready?"

I wasn't, really, but nodded anyway. "Let's do this," I whispered, and Ash pushed open the door.

A blast of that same cold, stinging air hit my face as we went through, nearly taking my breath away. The room beyond was painfully cold; ice columns held up the ceiling, and the floor was slick and frozen. In the center of the room, surrounded by pale, aloof Winter gentry and pet goblins, the queen of the Unseelie Court waited for us.

Queen Mab sat atop her throne of ice, regal, beautiful and terrifying. Her skin was paler than snow, her blue-black hair coiled elegantly atop her head, held in place with icy needles. She wore a cloak of white fur and held a crystal goblet in one delicate, long-fingered hand. Her eyes, black and as depthless as space, rose slowly, capturing me in a piercing stare. Above the furred ruff, bloodred lips curled into a slow smile.

"Meghan Chase," Queen Mab purred. "Welcome to the Winter Court. Please, make yourself comfortable. I'm afraid you could be here a long, long time."

* * * * *

Julie Kagawa was born in Sacramento, California. But nothing exciting really happened to her there. So, at the age of nine she and her family moved to Hawaii, which she soon discovered was inhabited by large carnivorous insects, colonies of house geckos and frequent hurricanes. She spent much of her time in the ocean, when she wasn't getting chased out of it by reef sharks, jellyfish and the odd eel.

To pay the rent, Julie worked in different bookstores over the years, but discovered the managers frowned upon her reading the books she was supposed to be shelving. So she turned to her other passion: training animals. She worked as a professional dog trainer for several years, dodging Chihuahua bites and overly enthusiastic Labradors, until her first book sold and she stopped training to write full-time.

Julie now lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where the frequency of shark attacks are at an all-time low. She lives with her husband, two obnoxious cats, one Australian shepherd who is too smart for his own good and the latest addition, a hyperactive papillon.

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THE IRON DAUGHTER

Julie Kagawa

“Why should I trust you?” I snarled at Ash.

I was completely aware that I was being an idiot, that we needed to get out of there before anyone saw us, but it was like I’d eaten spill-your-guts, and words just kept pouring out. “You’ve been lying to me from the beginning. Everything you said, everything we did, that was all a ploy to bring me here. You set me up from the very start.”

“Meghan—”

“Is this a game you like to play? Make the stupid human girl fall for you and then laugh as you rip her heart out? You knew what Rowan was doing, and you didn’t do anything to stop it!”

“Of course not!” Ash snarled back, his vehemence startling me into silence. “I had to make everyone believe I didn’t care, or they would’ve torn you apart. Emotions are a weakness here, Meghan. And the Winter Court preys on the weak. They would’ve hurt you to get to me. Now, come on.” He reached for me again, and I let him take my hand without protest. “Let’s get out of here before it’s too late.”

“I’m afraid it’s already too late,” drawled a snide, familiar voice, making my heart stop.

To Nick, my inspiration

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The Winter Court

The Iron King stood before me, magnificent in his beauty, silver hair whipping about like an unruly waterfall. His long black coat billowed behind him, accenting the pale, angular face and translucent skin, the blue-green veins glowing beneath the surface. Lightning flickered in the depths of his jet-black eyes, and the steel tentacles running the length of his spine and shoulders coiled around him like a cloak of wings, glinting in the light. Like an avenging angel, he floated toward me, hand outstretched, a sad, tender smile on his lips.

I stepped forward to meet him as the iron cables wrapped gently around me, drawing me close. “Meghan Chase,” Machina murmured, running a hand through my hair. I shivered, keeping my hands at my sides as the tentacles caressed my skin. “You have come. What is it you want?”

I frowned. What did I want? What had I come for? “My brother,” I answered, remembering. “You kidnapped my brother, Ethan, to draw me here. I want him back.”

“No.” Machina shook his head, moving closer. “You did not come for your brother, Meghan Chase. Nor did you come for the Unseelie prince you claim to love. You came here for one thing only. Power.”

My head throbbed and I tried backing away, but the cables held me fast. “No,” I muttered, struggling against the iron net. “This…this is wrong. This isn’t how it went.”

“Show me, then.” Machina opened his arms wide. “How was it ‘supposed’ to go? What did you come here to do? Show me, Meghan Chase.”

“No!”

“Show me!”

Something throbbed in my hand: the beating pulse of the Witchwood arrow. With a yell, I raised my arm and drove the sharpened point through

Machina's chest, sinking the arrow into his heart.

Machina staggered back, giving me a look of shocked horror. Only it wasn't Machina anymore but a faery prince with midnight hair and bright silver eyes. Lean and dangerous, silhouetted all in black, his hand went to the sword at his belt before he realized it was too late. He swayed, fighting to stay on his feet, and I bit down a scream.

"Meghan," Ash whispered, a thin line of red trickling from his mouth. His hands clutched at the arrow in his chest as he fell to his knees, pale gaze beseeching mine. "Why?"

Shaking, I raised my hands and saw they were covered in glistening crimson, running rivulets down my arms, dripping to the ground. Below the slick coating, things wiggled beneath my skin, pushing up through the surface, like leeches in blood. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should be terrified, appalled, majorly grossed out. I wasn't. I felt powerful, powerful and strong, as if electricity surged beneath my skin, as if I could do anything I wanted and no one could stop me.

I looked down at the Unseelie prince and sneered at the pathetic figure. Could I really have loved such a weakling once upon a time?

"Meghan." Ash knelt there, the life fading from him bit by bit, even as he struggled to hold on. For a brief moment, I admired his stubborn tenacity, but it wouldn't save him in the end. "What about your brother?" he pleaded. "And your family? They're waiting for you to come home."

Iron cables unfurled from my back and shoulders, spreading around me like glittering wings. Gazing down at the Unseelie prince, helpless before me, I gave him a patient smile.

"I *am* home."

The cables slashed down in a silver blur, slamming into the faery's chest and staking him to the ground. Ash jerked, his mouth gaping silently, before his head lolled back and he shattered like crystal on concrete.

Surrounded by the glittering remains of the Unseelie prince, I threw back my head and laughed, and it turned into a ragged scream as I wrenched myself awake.

* * *

MY NAME IS Meghan Chase.

I've been in the palace of the Winter fey for a while now. How long exactly? I don't know. Time doesn't flow right in this place. While I've been stuck in the Nevernever, the outside world, the mortal world, has gone on without me. If I ever get out of here, if I ever make it home, I might find a hundred years have passed while I was gone, like Rip van Winkle, and all my family and friends are long dead.

I try not to think of that too often, but sometimes, I can't help but wonder.

My room was cold. It was always cold. *I* was always cold. Not even the sapphire flames in the hearth were enough to drive out the incessant chill. The walls and ceiling were made of opaque, smoky ice; even the chandelier sparkled with a thousand icicles. Tonight, I wore sweatpants, gloves, a thick sweater and a wool hat, but it wasn't enough. Outside my window, the underground city of the Winter fey sparkled with icy radiance. Dark forms leaped and fluttered in the shadows, flashing claws, teeth and wings. I shivered and gazed up at the sky. The ceiling of the vast cavern was too far away to see through the darkness, but thousands of tiny lights, balls of faery fire or faeries themselves, twinkled like a blanket of stars.

There was a rap at my door.

I didn't call out *Come in.* I'd learned not to do so in the past. This was the Unseelie Court, and inviting them into your room was a very, very bad idea. I couldn't keep them out completely, but the fey follow rules above all else, and by order of their queen, I was not to be bothered unless I requested it.

Letting them into my room could almost sound like such a request.

I crossed the floor, my breath streaming around me, and cracked open the door.

A slinky black cat sat on the floor with its tail curled around itself, gazing up at me with unblinking yellow eyes. Before I could say anything, it hissed and darted through the crack like a streak of shadow.

"Hey!"

I spun around, but the cat was no longer a cat. Tiaothin the phouka stood there, grinning at me, canines glinting. Of course. It would be the phouka; they didn't follow social rules. In fact, they seemed to take great pleasure in breaking them. Furred ears peeked out of her dreadlocked hair, twitching sporadically. She wore a gaudy jacket that sparkled with fake gems and studs, ripped jeans and combat boots. Unlike the Seelie Court,

the Unseelie fey actually preferred “mortal” clothing. Whether it was in direct defiance of the Seelie Court, or because they wanted to blend in more with humans, I wasn’t sure.

“What do you want?” I asked cautiously. Tiaothin had taken a keen interest in me when I was brought to court, the insatiable curiosity of a phouka, I suppose. We’d talked a few times, but she wasn’t exactly what I’d call a friend. The way she stared at me, unblinking, like she was sizing me up for her next meal, always made me nervous.

The phouka hissed, running her tongue along her teeth. “You’re not ready,” she said in her sibilant voice, looking me over skeptically. “Hurry. Hurry and change. We should go, quickly.”

I frowned. Tiaothin had always been difficult to understand, bouncing from one subject to the next so quickly it was hard to keep up. “Go where?” I asked, and she giggled.

“The queen,” Tiaothin purred, flicking her ears back and forth. “The queen has called for you.”

My stomach twisted into a tight ball. Ever since I’d come to the Winter Court with Ash, I’d been dreading this moment. When we’d first arrived at the palace, the queen regarded me with a predatory smile and dismissed me, saying that she wished to speak to her son alone and would call for me soon. Of course, “soon” was a relative term in Faery, and I’d been on pins and needles ever since, waiting for Mab to remember me.

That was also the last time I saw Ash.

Thinking of Ash sent a flutter through my stomach, reminding me how much had changed. When I first came to Faery, searching for my kidnapped brother, Ash had been the enemy, the cold, dangerous son of Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court. When war threatened the courts, Mab sent Ash to capture me, hoping to use me as leverage against my father, King Oberon. But, frantic to save my brother, I made a bargain with the Winter prince, instead: if he helped me rescue Ethan, I would return with him to the Unseelie Court without a fight. At that point, it was a desperate gamble; I needed all the help I could get to face down the Iron King and save my brother. But, somewhere in that blasted wasteland of dust and iron, watching Ash battle the realm that was poisoning his very essence, I realized I was in love with him.

Ash had gotten me there, but he almost didn’t survive his brush with Machina. The King of the Iron fey was insanely strong, almost invincible.

Against all odds, I managed to defeat Machina, rescue my brother, and take him home.

That night as per our contract, Ash came for me. It was time to honor my end of the bargain. Leaving my family behind once more, I followed Ash into Tir Na Nog, the land of Winter.

The journey through Tir Na Nog was cold, dark, and terrifying. Even with the Winter prince at my side, Faery was still savage and inhospitable, especially to humans. Ash was the perfect bodyguard, dangerous, alert and protective, but he seemed distant at times, distracted. And the farther we went into Winter, the more he drew away, sealing himself off from me and the world. And he wouldn't tell me why.

On the last night of our journey we were attacked. A monstrous wolf, sent by Oberon himself, tracked us down, intent on killing Ash and spiriting me back to the Summer Court. We managed to escape, but Ash was wounded fighting the creature, so we took refuge in an abandoned ice cave to rest and bind his wounds.

He was silent as I wrapped a makeshift bandage around his arm, but I could feel his eyes on me as I tied it off. Releasing his arm, I looked up to meet his silvery gaze. Ash blinked slowly, giving me that look that meant he was trying to figure me out. I waited, hoping I would finally glean some insight into his sudden aloofness.

"Why didn't you run?" he asked softly. "If that thing had killed me, you wouldn't have to come back to Tir Na Nog. You would've been free."

I scowled at him.

"I agreed to that contract, same as you," I muttered, tying off the bandage with a jerk, but Ash didn't even grunt. Angry now, I glared up at him, meeting his eyes. "What, you think just because I'm human I was going to back out? I knew what I was getting into, and I am going to uphold my end of the bargain, no matter what happens. And if you think I'd leave you just so I wouldn't have to meet Mab, then you don't know me at all."

"It's *because* you're human," Ash continued in that same quiet voice, holding my gaze, "that you missed a tactical opportunity. A Winter fey in your position wouldn't have come back. They wouldn't let their emotions get in the way. If you're going to survive in the Unseelie Court, you have to start thinking like them."

“Well, I’m *not* like them.” I rose and took a step back, trying to ignore the feeling of hurt and betrayal, the stupid angry tears pressing at the corners of my eyes. “I’m not a Winter faery. I’m human, with human feelings and emotions. And if you want me to apologize for that, you can forget it. I can’t just shut off my feelings like you can.”

I whirled to stalk away in a huff, but Ash rose with blinding speed and gripped my upper arms. I stiffened, locking my knees and keeping my back straight, but struggling with him would have been useless. Even wounded and bleeding, he was much stronger than me.

“I’m not ungrateful,” he murmured against my ear, making my stomach flutter despite itself. “I just want you to understand. The Winter Court preys on the weak. It’s their nature. They will try to tear you apart, physically and emotionally, and I won’t always be there to protect you.”

I shivered, anger melting away, as my own doubts and fears came rushing back. Ash sighed, and I felt his forehead touch the back of my hair, his breath fanning my neck. “I don’t want to do this,” he admitted in a low, anguished voice. “I don’t want to see what they’ll try to do to you. A Summer fey in the Winter Court doesn’t stand much of a chance. But I vowed that I would bring you back, and I’m bound to that promise.” He raised his head, squeezing my shoulders in an almost painful grip as his voice dropped a few octaves, turning grim and cold. “So you have to be stronger than they are. You can’t let down your guard, no matter what. They will lead you on, with games and pretty words, and they will take pleasure in your misery. Don’t let them get to you. And don’t trust anyone.” He paused, and his voice went even lower. “Not even me.”

“I’ll always trust you,” I whispered without thinking, and his hands tightened, turning me almost savagely to face him.

“No,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “You won’t. I’m your enemy, Meghan. Never forget that. If Mab tells me to kill you in front of the entire court, it’s my duty to obey. If she orders Rowan or Sage to carve you up slowly, making sure you suffer every second of it, I’m expected to stand there and let them do it. Do you understand? My feelings for you don’t matter in the Winter Court. Summer and Winter will always be on opposite sides, and nothing will change that.”

I knew I should be afraid of him. He was an Unseelie prince, after all, and had in no uncertain terms admitted he would kill me if Mab ordered him to. But he also admitted to having feelings for me, feelings that didn’t

matter, but it still made my stomach squirm when I heard it. And maybe I was being naive, but I couldn't believe Ash would willingly hurt me, even in the Winter Court. Not with the way he was looking at me now, his silver eyes conflicted and angry.

He stared at me a moment longer, then sighed. "You didn't hear a word I said, did you?" he murmured, closing his eyes.

"I'm not afraid," I told him, which was a lie: I was terrified of Mab and the Unseelie Court that waited at the end of this journey. But if Ash was there, I would be all right.

"You are infuriatingly stubborn," Ash muttered, raking a hand through his hair. "I don't know how I'm going to protect you when you have no concept of self-preservation."

I stepped close to him, placing a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beat under his shirt. "I trust you," I said, rising so our faces were inches apart, trailing my fingers down his stomach. "I know you'll find a way."

His breath hitched, and he regarded me hungrily. "You're playing with fire, you know that?"

"That's weird, considering you're an ice prin—" I didn't get any further, as Ash leaned in and kissed me. I looped my arms around his neck as his snaked around my waist, and for a few moments the cold couldn't touch me.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, he was back to being distant and aloof, barely speaking to me no matter how much I prodded. That night, we reached the underground palace of the Winter Court, and Mab dismissed me almost immediately. A servant showed me to my quarters, and I sat in the small, chilly room waiting for Ash to find me again.

He never returned from his meeting with the queen, and after several hours of waiting, I finally ventured into the halls of the Winter Court, looking for him. That's when I found Tiaothin, or rather, she found me in the library, playing keep-away with a hulking Jack-in-Irons as he stalked me between the aisles. After getting rid of the giant, she informed me that Prince Ash was no longer in the palace, and no one had any idea when he would be back.

“But that’s just Ash,” she’d said, grinning at me from atop a bookcase. “He’s hardly ever at court. You catch a glimpse of him and *poof!* He’s gone for another few months.”

Why would Ash just leave like that? I wondered for about the billionth time. *He could’ve at least told me where he was going, and when he’d be back. He didn’t have to leave me hanging.*

Unless he was deliberately avoiding me. Unless everything he’d said, the kiss we’d shared, the emotions in his eyes and voice, meant nothing to him. Maybe everything he’d done was only to bring me to the Winter Court.

“You’re going to be late,” Tiaothin purred, jerking me back to the present, watching me with glowing cat eyes. “Mab doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Right,” I said faintly, shaken out of my dark mood. *Oops, that’s right. I’ve got an audience with the Faery Queen of Winter.* “Just give me a minute to change.” I waited, but when Tiaothin didn’t move, I scowled at her. “Uh, a little privacy, please?”

Tiaothin giggled, and in one shivery motion, became a shaggy black goat, who bounced out of the room on all fours. I shut the door and leaned against it, feeling my heart thud in my chest. Mab wanted to see me. The Queen of the Unseelie Court was finally calling on me. I shivered and pushed away from the door, walking to my dresser and the icy mirror on top.

My reflection stared back at me, slightly distorted by the cracks in the ice. Sometimes, I still didn’t recognize myself. My straight blond hair was almost silver in the darkness of the room, and my eyes seemed far too big for my face. And there were other things, a thousand little details I couldn’t put my finger on, that told me I wasn’t human, that I was something to be feared. And of course, there was the most obvious difference. Pointed ears knifed up from the sides of my head, a screaming reminder of how unnormal I was.

I broke eye contact with my reflection and looked down at my clothes. They were warm and comfortable, but I was pretty sure meeting the Queen of the Unseelie Court dressed in sweatpants and a baggy sweater was a bad idea.

Great. I’m supposed to meet the Queen of the Winter fey in five minutes. What do I wear?

Closing my eyes, I tried collecting the glamour around me and shaping it over my clothes. Nothing. The massive rush of power I'd drawn on while battling the Iron King seemed to have faded, so much that I couldn't craft even the simplest illusion anymore. And not for lack of trying. Recalling my lessons with Grimalkin, a faery cat I'd met on my first trip to the Nevernever, I'd tried to become invisible, make shoes levitate and create faery fire. All failures. I couldn't even feel the glamour anymore, though I knew it was all around me. Glamour is fueled by emotion, and the wilder and more passionate the emotion—rage, lust, love—the easier it is to draw on. Yet I couldn't access it like I used to. It seemed I was back to being plain, nonmagical Meghan Chase. With pointy ears.

It was strange; for years, I hadn't even known I was half-fey. It was just a few months ago, on my sixteenth birthday, that my best friend Robbie had revealed himself to be Robin Goodfellow, the infamous Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* My kid brother, Ethan, had been kidnapped by faeries and I needed to rescue him. Oh, and by the way, I was the half-human daughter of King Oberon, Lord of the Summer fey. It took some getting used to, both the knowledge that I was half-faery and that I could use the magic of the fey—faery glamour—to work my own spells. Not that I was very good at it—I sucked, much to Grimalkin's irritation—but that wasn't the point. I hadn't even believed in faeries back then, but now that my magic was gone, it felt like pieces of me were missing.

With a sigh, I opened the dresser and pulled out jeans, a white shirt and a long black coat, shrugging into them as quickly as I could to avoid freezing to death. For a moment, I wondered if I should dress in something fancy, like an evening gown. After a moment I decided against it. The Unseelie spurned formal attire. I'd have a better chance of survival if I tried fitting in.

When I opened the door, Tiaothin, no longer a goat or cat, stared at me and broke into a toothy leer. "This way," she hissed, backing into the icy corridor. Her yellow eyes seemed to float in the darkness. "The queen awaits."

* * *

I FOLLOWED TIAOTHIN down the dark, twisted hallways, trying to keep my gaze straight ahead. Out of the corners of my eyes, however, I still caught

glimpses of the nightmares lurking in the halls the Unseelie Court.

A spindly bogey crouched behind a door like a giant spider, the pale, emaciated face staring at me through the crack. An enormous black hound with glowing eyes trailed us down the hallways, making no noise at all, until Tiaothin hissed at it and it slunk away. Two goblins and a shark-toothed redcap huddled in a corner, rolling dice made of teeth and tiny bones. As I passed, an argument broke out, the goblins pointing to the redcap and crying "Cheat, cheat!" in high-pitched voices. I didn't look back, but a shriek rang out behind me, followed by the wet sound of snapping bones. I shuddered and followed Tiaothin around a corner.

The corridor ended, opening into a massive room with icicles dangling from the ceiling like glittering chandeliers. Will-o'-the-wisps and globes of faery fire drifted between them, sending shards of fractured light over the walls and floor. The floor was shrouded in ice and mist, and my breath steamed in the air as we entered. Icy columns held up the ceiling, sparkling like translucent crystal and adding to the dazzling, confusing array of light and colors swirling around the room. Dark, wild music echoed throughout the chamber, played by a group of humans on a corner stage. The musicians' eyes were glazed over as they sawed and beat at their instruments, their bodies frighteningly thin. Their hair hung long and lank, as if they hadn't cut it for years. Yet, they didn't seem to be distressed or unhappy, playing their instruments with zombielike fervor, seemingly blind to their inhuman audience.

Dozens of Unseelie fey milled about the chamber, each one a creature straight out of a nightmare. Ogres and redcaps, goblins and spriggans, kobolds, phoukas, hobs and faeries I didn't have a name for, all wandering to and fro in the shifting darkness.

I quickly scanned the room, searching for tousled black hair and bright silver eyes. My heart fell. He wasn't here.

On the far side of the room, a throne of ice hovered in the air, glowing with frigid brilliance. Sitting on that throne, poised with the power of a massive glacier, was Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court.

The Winter Queen was stunning, plain and simple. When I was in Oberon's court I'd seen her beside her rival, Titania, the Summer Queen, who was also beautiful but in an evil socialite type of way. Titania also held a grudge against me for being Oberon's daughter, and had tried to turn me into a deer once, so she wasn't my favorite person. Though they

were complete opposites, the two queens were insanely powerful. Titania was a summer storm, beautiful and deadly and prone to frying something with lightning if it pissed her off. Mab was the coldest day in winter, where everything lies still and dead, held in fear of the unforgiving ice that killed the world before and could again.

The queen lounged in her chair, surrounded by several fey gentry—the sidhe—dressed in expensive, modern-day clothes, crisp white business suits and pin-striped Armani. When I saw her last, in Oberon's court, Mab had worn a flowing black dress that writhed like living shadows. Today, she was dressed in white: a white pantsuit, opal-tinted nails and ivory heels, her dark hair styled elegantly atop her head. Depthless black eyes, like a night without stars, looked up and spotted me, and her pale mulberry lips curved in a slow smile.

A chill slithered up my back. Fey care little for mortals. Humans are merely playthings to be used up and discarded. Both the Seelie and Unseelie Courts are subject to this. Even if I was half-fey and Oberon's daughter, I was all alone in the court of my father's ancient enemies. If I irritated Mab, there was no telling what the queen would do. Maybe turn me into a white rabbit and sic the goblins on me, though that seemed more Titania's style. I had a feeling Mab could come up with something infinitely more awful and twisted, and that made me very afraid.

Tiaothin ambled through the crowds of Unseelie fey, who paid her little attention. Most of their interest was directed at me as I followed, my heart thudding against my ribs. I felt the hungry stares, the eager grins and the eyes on the back of my neck, and concentrated on keeping my head up and my step confident. Nothing attracts faeries more than fear. A sidhe noble with a face that was all sharp angles caught my gaze and smiled, and my heart contracted painfully. He reminded me of Ash, who wasn't here, who had left me alone in this court of monsters.

The Winter Queen's chill grew more pronounced the closer we got; soon it was so cold it hurt to breathe. Tiaothin reached the foot of the throne and bowed. I did the same, though it was hard to do so without my teeth chattering. The Unseelie fey crowded behind us, their breath and murmuring voices making my skin crawl.

"Meghan Chase." The queen's voice rasped over the assembly, making my hair stand on end. Tiaothin slunk away and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me truly alone. "How good of you to join us."

“It’s an honor to be here, my lady,” I replied, using every ounce of my willpower to keep my voice from shaking. A tremor slipped out anyway, and not just from the cold. Mab smiled, amused, and leaned back, observing me with emotionless black eyes. Silence fell for a few heartbeats.

“So.” The queen tapped her nails with a rhythmic clicking sound, making me jump. “Here we are. You must think you are very clever, daughter of Oberon.”

“I—I’m sorry?” I stammered, as an icy fist gripped my heart. This wasn’t starting well, not at all.

“You’re not,” Mab continued, giving me a patient smile. “But you will be. Make no mistake about that.” She leaned forward, looking utterly inhuman, and I fought the urge to run screaming from the throne room. “I have heard of your exploits, Meghan Chase,” the queen rasped, narrowing her eyes. “Did you not think I would find out? You tricked a prince of the Unseelie Court into following you into the Iron Realm. You made him fight your enemies for you. You bound him to a contract that nearly killed him. My precious boy, almost lost to me forever, because of you. How do you think that makes me feel?” Mab’s smile grew more predatory, as my stomach twisted in fear. What could she do to me? Encase me in ice? Freeze me from the inside out? Chill my blood so I would never be warm again, no matter what I wore or how hot it became? I shivered, but then noticed a faint shimmer, like heat waves, around me, and suddenly realized Mab was tinting the air with glamour, manipulating my emotions and letting me imagine the worst fate possible. She didn’t have to threaten or say anything; I was terrifying myself quite well.

In a lucid moment of distraction, I wondered if Ash had done the same to my emotions, manipulating me into falling for him. If Mab could do it, I’m sure her sons had the same talent. Were my feelings for Ash real, or some sort of fabricated glamour?

Now’s not the time to wonder about that, Meghan!

Mab stared at me, gauging my reaction. I still shook in fear, but a part of me knew what the queen was doing. If I lost it and begged for mercy, I would find myself trapped in a faery contract before I knew what was happening. Promises are deadly serious among the fey, and I wasn’t going to let Mab strong-arm me into pledging something I would instantly regret.

I took a furtive breath to collect my thoughts, so that when I did answer the Queen of the Winter fey, I wouldn't start bawling like a two-year-old.

"Forgive me, Queen Mab," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I meant no harm to you or yours. I needed Ash's help to rescue my brother from the Iron King."

At the mention of the Iron King, the Unseelie fey behind me stirred and growled, glancing around warily. I felt hackles rise, teeth bare and claws unsheathe. For normal faeries, iron was deadly poison, draining their magic and burning their flesh. An entire kingdom made of iron was horrible and terrifying to them; a faery ruler called the Iron King was blasphemous. For a moment, I had the satisfying thought that the Iron fey had become the bogeys and bogeymen of the faery world, and bit down a vindictive smile.

"I would name you a liar, girl," Mab said calmly, as the growls and mutterings behind me died down, "if I had not heard the same from my son's own lips. Rest assured, the Iron King's minions are no threat to us. Even now, Ash and his brothers are scouring our territory for these Iron fey. If the abominations are within our borders, we will hunt them down and destroy them."

I felt a rush of relief, but not because of Mab's claim. Ash was out there. He had a reason not to be at court.

"And yet…" Mab regarded me with a look that made my stomach squirm. "I cannot help but wonder how you managed to survive. Perhaps Summer is in league with the Iron fey, plotting with them against the Winter Court. That would be terribly amusing, wouldn't it, Meghan Chase?"

"No," I said softly. In my mind's eye, I saw the Iron King, reeling back as I drove the arrow through his chest, and clenched my fists to stop them from shaking. I could still see Machina writhing in pain, felt something cold and serpentine slithering under my skin. "The Iron King was going to destroy Summer as well as Winter. He's dead, now. I killed him."

Mab narrowed her eyes to black slits. "And you would have me believe that you, a half-human with virtually no power, managed to kill the Iron King?"

"Believe her," a new voice rang out, making my stomach twist and my heart jump to my throat. "I was there. I saw what happened."

Voices rose around me as the ranks of Unseelie fey parted like waves. I couldn't move. I was rooted to the spot, my heart pounding in my chest as the lean, dangerous form of Prince Ash strode into the chamber.

I shivered, and my stomach began turning nervous backflips. Ash looked much as he always did, darkly beautiful in black and gray, his pale skin a sharp contrast to his hair and clothes. His sword hung at his side, the sheath a luminous blue-black, giving off a frozen aura.

I was so relieved to see him. I stepped toward him, smiling, only to be stopped dead by his cold glare. Confused, I stumbled to a halt. Maybe he didn't recognize me. I met his gaze, waiting for his expression to thaw, for him to give me the tiny smile I adored so much. It didn't happen. His frosty eyes swept over me in a brief, dismissive glance, before he stepped around me and continued toward the queen. I felt a stab of shock and hurt; maybe he was playing it cool in front of the queen, but he could've at least said *hi*. I made the mental note to scold him later when we were alone.

"Prince Ash," Mab purred, as Ash went down on one knee before the throne. "You have returned. Are your brothers with you?"

Ash raised his head, but before he could answer, another voice interrupted him.

"Our youngest brother practically fled our presence in his haste to get to you, Queen Mab," said a high, clear voice behind me. "If I didn't know better, I would think he didn't want to speak to you in front of us."

Ash rose, his face carefully blank, as two more figures strode into the chamber, scattering fey like birds. Like Ash, they wore long, thin blades at their hips, and carried themselves with the easy grace of royalty.

The first, the one who had spoken, resembled Ash in build and height: lean, graceful and dangerous. He had a thin, pointed face, and black hair that bristled like spines atop his head. A white trench coat billowed out behind him, and a gold stud sparkled in one pointed ear. His gaze met mine as he swept past, ice-blue eyes glittering like chips of diamond, and his lips curled in a lazy smirk.

The second brother was taller than his siblings, more willowy than lean, his long raven hair tied back in a ponytail that reached his waist. A great gray wolf trailed behind him, amber eyes slitted and wary. "Rowan," Mab smiled at the first prince as the two bowed to her as Ash had done. "Sage. All my boys, home at last. What news do you bring me? Have you

found these Iron fey within our borders? Have you brought me their poisonous little hearts?"

"My queen." It was the tallest of the three that spoke, the oldest brother, Sage. "We have searched Tir Na Nog from border to border, from the Ice Plains to the Frozen Bog to the Broken Glass Sea. We have found nothing of the Iron fey our brother has spoken of."

"Makes you wonder if our dear brother Ash exaggerated a bit," Rowan spoke up, his voice matching the smirk on his face. "Seeing as these 'legions of Iron fey' seem to have vanished into thin air."

Ash glared at Rowan and looked bored, but I felt the blood rush to my face.

"He's telling the truth," I blurted out, and felt every eye in the court turn on me. "The Iron fey are real, and they're still out there. And if you don't take them seriously, you'll be dead before you know what's happening."

Rowan smiled at me, a slit-eyed, dangerous smile. "And why would the half-blood daughter of Oberon care if the Winter Court lives or dies?"

"Enough." Mab's voice rasped through the chamber. She stood and waved a hand at the fey assembled behind us. "Get out. Leave, all of you. I will speak with my sons alone."

The crowd dispersed, slinking, stomping or gliding from the throne room. I hesitated, trying to catch Ash's gaze, wondering if I was included in this conversation. After all, I knew about the Iron fey, too. I succeeded in capturing his attention, but the Winter prince gave me a bored, hostile glare and narrowed his eyes.

"Didn't you hear the queen, half-breed?" he asked coldly, and my heart contracted into a tiny ball. I stared at him, mouth open, unwilling to believe this was Ash speaking to me, but he continued with ruthless disdain. "You're not welcome here. Leave."

I felt the sting of angry tears, and took a step toward him. "Ash—"

His eyes glittered as he shot me a glare of pure loathing. "It's *Master* Ash, or *Your Highness* to you, half-breed. And I don't recall giving you permission to speak to me. Remember that, because the next time you forget your place, I'll remind you with my blade." He turned away, dismissing me in one cold, callous gesture. Rowan snickered, and Mab watched me from atop her throne with a cool, amused gaze.

My throat tightened and a deluge pressed behind my eyes, ready to burst. I trembled and bit my lip to keep the flood in check. I would *not* cry. Not now, in front of Mab and Rowan and Sage. They were waiting for it; I could see it on their faces as they watched me expectantly. I could not show any weakness in front of the Unseelie Court if I wanted to survive.

Especially now that Ash had become one of the monsters.

With as much dignity as I could muster, I bowed to Queen Mab. "Excuse me then, Your Majesty," I said, in a voice that trembled only slightly. "I will leave you and your sons in peace."

Mab nodded, and Rowan gave me a mocking, exaggerated bow. Ash and Sage ignored me completely. I spun on my heel and walked from the throne room with my head held high, my heart breaking with every step.

CHAPTER TWO

A Declaration

When I woke up, the room was light, cold beams streaming in the window. My face felt sticky and hot, and my pillow was damp. For one blissful moment, I didn't recall the events of the past night. Then, like a black wave, memory came rushing back.

Tears threatened again, and I buried my head under the covers. I'd spent most of the night sobbing into my pillow, my face muffled so that my cries wouldn't be overheard by some fey in the hall.

Ash's cruel words stabbed me through the heart. Even now, I could hardly believe the way he'd acted in the throne room, like I was scum beneath his boots, like he truly despised me. I'd been hoping for him, longing for him, to come back, and now those feelings were a twisted nail inside. I felt betrayed, as if what we shared on our journey to the Iron King was only a farce, a tactic the cunning Ice prince had used to get me to come to the Unseelie Court. Or perhaps he had just grown tired of me and moved on. Just another reminder of how capricious and insensitive the fey could be.

In that moment of utter loneliness and confusion, I wished Puck were here. Puck, with his carefree attitude and infectious smile, who always knew what to say to make me laugh again. As a human, Robbie Goodfell had been my neighbor and best friend; we shared everything, did everything, together. Of course, Robbie Goodfell turned out to be Robin Goodfellow, the infamous Puck of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and he was following Oberon's orders to protect me from the faery world. He'd disobeyed his king when he brought me into the Nevernever in search of Ethan, and again when I fled the Seelie Court and Oberon sent Puck to bring me back. His loyalty cost him dear when he was finally shot in a battle with one of Machina's lieutenants, Virus, and nearly killed. We were forced to leave him behind, deep within a dryad's tree, to heal from his

wounds, and guilt from that decision still ate at me. My eyes filled with fresh tears, remembering. Puck couldn't be dead. I missed him too much for that.

A tapping came at my door, startling me. "Meghaaaan" came the singsong voice of Tiaothin the phouka. "Wake uuuup. I know you're in there. Open the doooor."

"Go away," I yelled, wiping my eyes. "I'm not coming out, okay? I don't feel good."

Of course, this only encouraged her further. The tapping turned to scratching, setting my teeth on edge, and her voice grew louder, more insistent. Knowing she'd sit there all day, scratching and whining, I leaped off the bed, stomped across the room and wrenched open the door.

"What?" I snarled. The phouka blinked, taking in my rumpled appearance, tear-streaked face and swollen, runny nose. A knowing grin came to her lips, and my anger flared; if she was here just to taunt me, I was so not in the mood. Stepping back, I was about to slam the door in her face when she darted into the room and leaped gracefully onto my bed.

"Hey! Dammit, Tiaothin! Get out of here!" My protests went ignored, as the phouka bounced gleefully on the mattress, shredding holes in the blankets with her sharp claws.

"Meghan's in lo-ove," sang the phouka, making my heart stop. "Meghan's in lo-ove. Meghan and Ash, sitting in a tree—"

"Tiaothin, shut up!" I slammed the door and stalked toward her, glaring. The phouka giggled and came to a bouncing stop on my bed, sitting cross-legged on the pillow. Her gold-green eyes gleamed with mischief.

"I am not in love with Ash," I told her, crossing my arms over my chest. "Didn't you see the way he spoke to me, like I was dirt? Ash is a heartless, arrogant bastard. I hate him."

"Liar," the phouka retorted. "Liar liar, lying human. I saw the way you stared at him when he appeared. I know that look. You're smitten." Tiaothin snickered, flicking an ear back and forth as I squirmed. She grinned, showing all her teeth. "Not your fault, really. Ash just does that to people. No silly mortal can look at him and *not* fall head over heels. How many hearts do you think he's already broken?"

My spirits sank even lower. I'd thought I was special. I thought Ash cared for me, if only a little. Now, I realized I was probably just another

girl in a long line of humans who'd been foolish enough to fall for him.

Tiaothin yawned, settling back against my pillows. "I'm telling you this so you won't waste your time chasing after the impossible," she purred, slitting her eyes at me. "Besides," she continued, "Ash is already is love with someone else. Has been for a long, long time. He's never forgotten her."

"Ariella," I whispered.

She looked surprised. "He told you about her? Huh. Well then, you should already know Ash would never fall for a plain, half-human girl, not when Ariella was the most beautiful sidhe in the Winter Court. He'd never betray her memory, even if the law wasn't an issue. You know about the law, don't you?"

I didn't know about any law, and I really didn't care. I got the feeling the phouka wanted me to ask about it, but I wasn't going to oblige. But Tiaothin seemed determined to tell me anyway, and went on with a sniff.

"You're Summer," she said disdainfully. "We're Winter. It's against the law that the two should ever be involved. Not that we have many incidents, but occasionally some star-struck Summer fey will fall in love with a Winter, or vice versa. *All* sorts of problems there—Summer and Winter are not meant to be together. If they're found out, the high lords will demand they renounce their love at once. If they refuse, they're banished to the human world forever, so they can continue their blasphemous relationship out of sight of the courts…if they're not executed right then.

"So, you see," she finished, fixing me with a piercing stare, "Ash would never betray his queen and court for a *human.* It's best to forget about him. Maybe find a silly human boy in the mortal world, if Mab ever lets you go."

By now I was so miserable I couldn't open my mouth without screaming or crying. Bile burned my throat, and my eyes swelled up. I had to get out of here, away from Tiaothin's brutal truths, before I fell to pieces.

Biting my lip to keep the tears at bay, I turned and fled into the halls of the Unseelie Court.

I nearly tripped over a goblin, who hissed and gnashed his teeth at me, jagged fangs gleaming in the darkness. Muttering an apology, I hurried

away. A tall woman in a ghostly white dress floated down the corridor, eyes red and swollen, and I ducked down another hall to avoid her.

I needed to get out. Outside, into the clear, cold air, to be alone for just a few minutes, before I went crazy. The dark corridors and crowded halls were making me claustrophobic. Tiaothin had showed me the way out once; a pair of great double doors, one carved to resemble a laughing face, the other curled in a terrible snarl. I had searched for them on my own but could never find them. I suspected Mab put a spell on the doors to hide them from me, or maybe the doors themselves were playing a twisted game of hide-and-seek—doors did that sometimes in Faeryland. It was infuriating: I could see the sparkling, snow-covered city from my bedroom window, but could never get there.

I heard a clatter behind me and turned to see a group of redcaps coming down the hall, mad yellow eyes bright with hunger and greed. They hadn't seen me yet, but when they did, I'd be alone and unprotected, far from the safety of my room, and redcaps were *always* hungry. Fear gripped my heart. I hurried around a corner…

And there they stood, across an ice-slick foyer. The double doors, with their laughing face and snarling face, seeming to mock and threaten at the same time. Now that I'd finally found them, I hesitated. Would I be able to get back in, once I was out? Beyond the palace was the twisted, frightening city of the Winter fey. If I couldn't get back in, I'd freeze to death, or worse.

An excited whoop rang out. The redcaps had seen me.

I hurried across the floor, trying not to slip, as the tiles appeared to be made of colored ice. A pencil-thin butler in a black suit watched me impassively as I approached, his lank gray hair falling to his shoulders. Huge round eyes, like shiny mirrors, stared at me unblinking. Ignoring him, I grabbed the door with the laughing face and pulled, but it didn't budge.

"Going outside, Miss Chase?" the butler asked, tilting his smooth, egg-shaped head.

"Just for a while," I snapped, straining at the door, which, infuriatingly, started laughing at me. I didn't jump or scream, having experienced far stranger, but it did make me mad. "I'll be right back, I promise." I heard the jeering laughter of the redcaps, mingling with the howling of the door, and gave it a resounding kick. "Dammit, open up, you stupid thing!"

The butler sighed. “You are assaulting the wrong door, Miss Chase.” He reached over and pulled open the snarling door, which scowled at me as it creaked on its hinges. “Please be careful in your excursion outside,” the butler said primly. “Her Majesty would be most displeased if you… ahem…ran away. Not that you would, I’m sure. Her protection is all that keeps you from being frozen, or devoured.”

A blast of frigid air blew into the foyer. The land beyond was dark and cold. Glancing behind at the redcaps, who watched me from the shadows with bright, pointy grins, I shivered and stepped out into the snow.

I almost went back inside, it was so cold. My breath hung on the air, and ice eddies stung my exposed flesh, making it tingle and burn. A pristine, frozen courtyard stretched before me, trees, flowers, statues and fountains encased in the clearest ice. Great jagged crystals, some taller than my head, jutted out of the ground at random intervals, spearing into the sky. A group of fey dressed in glittering white sat on the lip of a fountain, long azure hair rippling down their backs. They saw me, snickered behind their hands and rose. The nails on their fingertips glimmered blue in the half-light.

I went the other way, my boots crunching through the snow, leaving deep prints behind. A while ago, I might’ve wondered how it could snow underground, but I’d long accepted that things never made sense in Faeryland. I didn’t really know where I was going, but moving seemed better than standing still.

“Where do you think you’re going, half-breed?”

Snow swirled, stinging my face and blinding me. When the blizzard receded, I was surrounded by the four fey girls who had been sitting at the fountain. Tall, elegant and beautiful, with their pale skin and shimmering cobalt hair, they hemmed me in like a pack of wolves, full frosted lips twisted into ugly sneers.

“Ooh, Snowberry, you were right,” one of them said, wrinkling her nose like she smelled something foul. “She *does* reek of a dead pig in the summer. I don’t know how Mab can stand it.”

Clenching my fists, I tried to keep my cool. I was *so* not in the mood for this now. *God, it’s like high school all over again. Will it never end? These are ancient faeries, for Pete’s sake, and they’re acting like my high school pom squad.*

The tallest of the pack, a willowy fey with poison green streaked through her azure hair, regarded me with cold blue eyes and stepped close, crowding me. I stood my ground, and her gaze narrowed. A year ago, I might have grinned benignly and nodded and agreed with everything they said, just to get them to leave me alone. Things were different now. These girls weren't the scariest things I'd seen. Not by a long shot.

"Can I help you?" I asked in the calmest voice I could manage.

She smiled. It was not a nice smile. "I'm just curious to see how a half-breed like you gets off on speaking to Prince Ash like an equal." She sniffed, curling her lip in disgust. "If I were Mab, I would've frozen your throat shut just for looking at him."

"Well, you're not," I said, meeting her gaze. "And since I'm a guest here, I don't think she'd approve of whatever you're planning to do to me. So, why don't we do each other a favor and pretend we don't exist? That would solve a lot of problems."

"You don't get it, do you, half-breed?" Snowberry pulled herself up, staring down her perfect nose at me. "Looking at my prince constitutes an act of war. That you actually *spoke* to him makes my stomach turn. You don't seem to understand that you disgust him, as well you should, with your tainted Summer blood and human stench. We'll have to do something about that, won't we?"

My prince? Was she talking about Ash? I stared at her, tempted to say something stupid like, *Funny, he never mentioned you.* She might act like a spoiled, rich, mean girl from my old school, but the way her eyes darkened until there were no pupils left reminded me that she was still fey.

"So." Snowberry stepped back and gave me a patronizing smile. "This is what we're going to do. You, half-breed, are going to promise me that you won't so much as glance at my sweet Ash, ever again. Breaking this promise means I get to pluck out your wandering eyes and make a necklace with them. I think that's a fair bargain, don't you?"

The rest of the girls giggled, and there was a hungry, eager edge to the sound, like they wanted to eat me alive. I could have told her not to worry. I could have told her that Ash hated me and she didn't have to threaten to get me to stay away. I didn't. I drew myself up, looked her in the eye, and asked, "And what if I don't?"

Silence fell. I felt the air get colder and braced myself for the explosion. A part of me knew this was stupid, picking a fight with a faery.

I would probably get my butt kicked, or cursed, or something nasty. I didn't care. I was tired of being bullied, tired of running into the bathroom to sob my eyes out. If this faery bitch wanted a fight, bring it on. I'd do my fair share of clawing, too.

"Well, isn't this fun." A smooth, confident voice cut through the silence, a second before all hell would have broken loose. We jumped as a lean figure dressed entirely in white materialized from the snow, his coat flapping behind him. The look on his pointed face glowed with haughty amusement.

"Prince Rowan!"

The prince grinned, his ice-blue eyes narrowed to slits. "Pardon me, girls," he said, slipping up beside me, making the pack fall back a few steps. "I don't mean to ruin your little party, but I need to borrow the half-breed for a moment."

Snowberry smiled at Rowan, all traces of hatefulness gone in an instant. "Of course, Your Highness," she cooed, as if she'd just been offered a wonderful gift. "Whatever you command. We were just keeping her company."

I wanted to gag, but Rowan smiled back as if he believed her, and the pack drifted away without a backward glance.

The prince's smile turned to a smirk as soon as they'd gone, and he gave me a sideways leer that made me instantly cautious. He might have saved me from Snowberry and her harpies, but I didn't think he'd done it to be chivalrous. "So, you're Oberon's half-blood," he purred, confirming my suspicion. His eyes raked me up and down, and I felt horribly exposed, as though he was undressing me with his gaze. "I saw you at Elysium last spring. Somehow I thought you were…taller."

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said frostily.

"Oh, you're not disappointing." Rowan smiled, his gaze lingering on my chest. "Not a bit." He snickered again and stepped back, gesturing for me to follow. "Come on, Princess. Let's take a walk. I want to show you something."

I really didn't want to, but I saw no way of politely refusing a prince of the Unseelie Court, especially since he'd just done me a favor by getting rid of the pack. So I followed him to another part of the courtyard, where frozen statues littered the snowy landscape, making it eerie and surreal. Some stood straight and proud, some were twisted in abject fear, arms and

limbs thrown up to protect themselves. Looking at some of their features, so real and lifelike, made me shudder. *The Queen of Winter has a creepy sense of style.*

Rowan paused in front of one statue, covered in a layer of smoky ice, its features barely distinguishable through the opaque seal. With a start, I realized this wasn't a statue at all. A human stared out of his ice prison, mouth open in a scream of terror, one hand flung out before him. His blue eyes, wide and staring, gazed down at me.

Then he blinked.

I stumbled back, a shriek lodging in my throat. The human blinked again, his terrified gaze beseeching mine. I saw his lips tremble, as if he wanted to say something but the ice rendered him immobile, frozen and helpless. I wondered how he could breathe.

"Brilliant, isn't it?" said Rowan, gazing at the statue in admiration. "Mab's punishment for those who disappoint her. They can see, feel and hear everything that goes on around them, so they're fully aware of what's happened to them. Their hearts beat, their brains function, but they don't age. They're suspended in time forever."

"How do they breathe?" I whispered, staring back at the gaping human.

"They don't." Rowan smirked. "They can't, of course. Their noses and mouths are full of ice. But they still keep trying. It's like they're suffocating for eternity."

"That's horrible!"

The sidhe prince shrugged. "Don't piss off Mab, is all I can tell you." He turned the full brunt of his icy gaze on me. "So, Princess," he continued, making himself comfortable at the base of the statue. "Tell me something, if you would." Pulling an apple out of nowhere, he bit into it, smiling at me all the while. "I hear you and Ash traveled all the way to the Iron King's realm and back. Or so he claims. What do you think of my dear little brother?"

I smelled a hidden motive and crossed my arms. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just making conversation." Rowan produced another apple and tossed it at me. I fumbled to catch it, and Rowan grinned. "Don't be so uptight. You'd give a brownie a nervous breakdown. So, was my brother a complete troll, or did he remember his manners?"

I was hungry. My stomach growled, and the apple felt cool and crisp in my hand. Before I knew it, I'd taken a bite. Sweet, tart juice flooded my mouth, with just a hint of bitter after-taste. "He was a perfect gentleman," I said with my mouth full, my voice sounding strange in my ears. "He helped me rescue my brother from the Iron King. I couldn't have done it without him."

Rowan reclined and gave me a lazy smile. "Do tell."

I frowned at his smirk. Something wasn't right. Why was I telling him this? I tried shutting up, clamping down on my tongue, but my mouth opened and the words rushed out of their own volition.

"My brother Ethan was stolen by the Iron King," I said, listening to myself babble on in horror. "I came into the Nevernever to get him back. When Ash was sent by Mab to capture me, I tricked him into making a contract with me, instead. If he helped me rescue Ethan, I would go with him to the Unseelie Court. He agreed to help, but when we got to the Iron Kingdom, it made Ash horribly sick, and he was captured by Machina's Iron Knights. I snuck into the Iron King's tower, used a magic arrow to kill Machina, rescued my brother and Ash, and then we came here."

I clapped both hands over my mouth to stop the torrent of words, but the damage was already done. Rowan looked like the cat who just ate the canary.

"So," he crooned, slitting his eyes at me, "my little brother let himself be tricked—by a weakling half-blood—into rescuing a mortal child and nearly killing himself in the process. How very unlike Ash. Tell me more, Princess."

I kept my hands over my mouth, muffling my words, even as they began pouring out. Rowan laughed and hopped off the statue base, stalking toward me with an evil grin. "Oh, come now, Princess, you know it's useless to resist. No need to make this harder on yourself."

I wanted to punch him, but I was afraid if I took my hands from my mouth, I'd reveal something else. Rowan kept coming, his grin turning predatory. I backed away, but a wave of dizziness and nausea swept through me and I stumbled, fighting to stay on my feet. The prince snapped his fingers, and the snow around my feet turned to ice, covering my boots and freezing me in place. Horrified, I watched the ice crawl up past my knees, making sharp, crinkling noises as it inched toward my waist.

It's cold! I shivered violently, tiny needles of pain stabbing my flesh through my clothes. I gasped, wanting desperately to get away from it, but of course I couldn't move. My stomach cramped, and another bout of nausea made my head spin. Rowan smiled, leaning back and watching me struggle.

"I can make it stop, you know," he said, munching on the last of his apple. "All you have to do is answer a few innocent questions, that's all. I don't know why you're being so difficult, unless, of course, you have something to hide. Who are you trying to protect, half-breed?"

The temperature was becoming unbearable. My muscles began to spasm from the awful, bone-numbing cold. My arms shook, and my hands dropped from my mouth.

"Ash," I whispered, but at that moment, the ice holding me in place shattered. With the sound of breaking china, it collapsed into thousands of crystalline shards, glinting in the weak light. I yelped and stumbled back, free of the icy embrace, as another lean, dark form melted out of the shadows.

"Ash." Rowan smiled as his brother stalked toward us, and my heart leaped. For a moment, I imagined Ash's gray eyes were narrowed in fury, but then he drew close and looked the same as he had the night before—cold, distant, slightly bored.

"What a coincidence," Rowan continued, still bearing that disgustingly smug grin. "Come and join us, little brother. We were just talking about you."

"What are you doing, Rowan?" Ash sighed, sounding more irritated than anything. "Mab told us not to bother the half-breed."

"Me? Bother her?" Rowan looked incredulous, blue eyes widening into the picture of innocence. "I'm never a bother. We were just having a scintillating conversation. Weren't we, Princess? Why don't you tell him what you just told me?"

Ash's silver gaze flicked to mine, a shadow of uncertainty crossing his face. My lips opened of their own accord, and I clapped my hands over my mouth again, stopping the words before they spilled out. Meeting his gaze, I shook my head, beseeching him with my eyes.

"Oh, come now, Princess, don't be shy," Rowan purred. "You seemed to have a lot to say about our dearest boy Ash, here. Go on and tell him."

I glared at Rowan, wishing I could tell him exactly what he could do with himself, but I was feeling so sick and light-headed now, it took all my concentration to stay upright. Ash's gaze hardened. Striding away from me, he bent and plucked something out of the snow, holding it up before him.

It was the fruit I'd dropped, a single bite taken out of the flesh, like Snow White's poisoned apple. Only it wasn't an apple now, but a big spotted toadstool, the fleshy insides white as bone. My stomach heaved, cramping violently, and I nearly lost the bite I'd taken.

Ash said nothing. Glaring at Rowan, he held up the mushroom and raised an eyebrow. Rowan sighed.

"Mab didn't specifically say we *couldn't* use spill-your-guts," Rowan said, shrugging his lean shoulders. "Besides, I think you'd be most interested in what our Summer princess has to say about you."

"Why should I be?" Ash tossed the mushroom away, looking bored again. "This conversation isn't important. I made the bargain to get her here, and now it's done. Anything I said or did was for the purpose of bringing her to court."

I gasped, my hands dropping away from my face, to stare at him. It was true, then. He'd been playing me all along. What he told me in the Iron Kingdom, everything we shared, none of that was real. I felt ice spreading through my stomach and shook my head, trying to erase what I just heard. "No," I muttered, too low for anyone to hear. "It's not true. It can't be. Ash, tell him you're lying."

"Mab doesn't care how I did it, as long as the goal was accomplished," Ash continued, oblivious to my torment. "Which is more than I can say for you." He crossed his arms and shrugged, the picture of indifference. "Now, if we're quite done here, the half-breed should return inside. The queen will not be pleased if she freezes to death."

"Ash," I whispered as he turned away. "Wait!" He didn't even glance at me. Tears pressed behind my eyes, and I stumbled after him, fighting a wave of dizziness. "Ash!"

"I love you!"

The words just tumbled out of me. I didn't mean to say them, but the moment I did, my stomach twisted with disbelief and utter horror. My hands flew back to my mouth, but it was far, far too late. Rowan grinned

his biggest yet, a smile full of terrible glee, like he'd been given the best present in the world.

Ash froze, his back still to me. For just a moment, I saw his hands clench at his sides.

"That's unfortunate for you, isn't it?" he said, his voice dead of emotion. "But the Summer Court has always been weak. Why would I touch the half-breed daughter of Oberon? Don't make me sick, human."

It was like an icy hand plunged into my body, ripping my heart from my chest. I felt actual physical pain lance through me. My legs buckled, and I collapsed to the snow, ice crystals biting into my palms. I couldn't breathe, couldn't even cry. All I could do was kneel there, the cold seeping through my jeans, hearing Ash's words echo through my head.

"Oh, that was cruel, Ash," Rowan said, sounding delighted. "I do believe you broke our poor princess's heart."

Ash said something else, something I didn't catch, because the ground began to twirl beneath me, and another wave of dizziness made my head spin. I could have fought it off, but I was numb to all feeling, and I didn't care at the moment. *Let the darkness come,* I thought, *let it take me away,* before it pulled a heavy blanket over my eyes and I dropped into oblivion.

CHAPTER THREE

The Scepter of the Seasons

I drifted for a while, neither awake nor asleep, caught somewhere between the two. Hazy, half-remembered dreams swam across my vision, mingling with reality until I didn't know which was which. I dreamed of my family, of Ethan and Mom and my stepdad, Luke. I dreamed of them going on without me, slowly forgetting who I was, that I ever existed. Shapes and voices floated in and out of my consciousness: Tiaothin telling me to snap out of it because she was bored, Rowan telling Queen Mab that he had no idea I would react so violently to a simple mushroom, another voice telling the queen that I might never wake up. Sometimes I dreamed that Ash was in the room, standing in a corner or beside my bed, just watching me with bright silver eyes. In my delirium, I might have heard him whisper that he was sorry.

"Humans are such fragile creatures, aren't they?" murmured a voice one night, as I drifted in and out of stupor. "One tiny nibble of spill-your-guts sends them into a coma. Pathetic." It snorted. "I heard this one was in love with Prince Ash. Makes you wonder what Mab will do to her, once she wakes up. She's none too pleased with the Summer whelp being all mushy-mushy with her favorite son."

"Well, she certainly picked an inconvenient time to go all Sleeping Beauty," added another voice, "what with the Exchange coming up and all." It snorted. "If she does wake up, Mab might kill her for the annoyance. Either way, it'll be entertaining." The sound of their laughter faded away, and I floated in darkness.

An eternity passed with few distractions. Voices slipping by me, unimportant. Tiaothin repeatedly poking me in the ribs, her sharp claws drawing blood, but the pain belonged to someone else. Scenes of my family: Mom on the porch with a police officer, explaining she didn't have

a missing daughter; Ethan playing in my room, which was now an office, repainted and refurnished, all my personal items given away.

There was a dull throb in my chest as I watched him; in another life, it might have been sorrow, longing, but I was beyond feeling anything now and watched my half brother with detached curiosity. He was talking to a familiar stuffed rabbit, and that made me frown. Wasn't that rabbit destroyed…?

"They have forgotten you," murmured a voice in the darkness. A deep, familiar voice. I turned and found Machina, his cables folded behind him, watching me with a small smile on his lips. His silver hair glowed in the blackness.

My brow furrowed. "You're not here," I muttered, backing away. "I killed you. You aren't real."

"No, my love." Machina shook his head, his hair rippling softly. "You did kill me, but I am still with you. I will always be with you, now. There is no avoiding it. We are one."

I drew back, shivering. "Go away," I said, retreating into the black. The Iron King watched me intently, but did not follow. "You're not here," I repeated. "This is just a dream, and you're dead! Leave me alone." I turned and fled into the darkness, until the soft glow of the Iron King faded into the void.

* * *

ANOTHER ETERNITY PASSED, or perhaps only a few seconds, when through the confusion and darkness, I felt a presence near the bed. *Mom?* I wondered, a little girl once more. Or maybe Tiaothin, come to bother me again. *Go away,* I told them, retreating into my dreams. *I don't want to see you. I don't want to see anyone. Just leave me alone.*

"Meghan," whispered a voice, heart-wrenchingly familiar, drawing me out of the void. I recognized it immediately, just as I realized it was a figment of my desperate imagination, because the real owner of that voice would never be here, talking to me.

Ash?

"Wake up," he murmured, his deep voice cutting through the layers of the darkness. "Don't do this. If you don't come out of this soon, you'll fade away and drift forever. Fight it. Come back to us."

I didn’t want to wake up. There was nothing but pain waiting for me in the real world. If I was asleep, I couldn’t feel anything. If I was asleep, I didn’t have to face Ash and the cold contempt on his face when he looked at me. Darkness was my retreat, my sanctuary. I drew back from Ash’s voice, deeper into the comforting blackness. And, through the layer of dreams and delirium, I heard a quiet sob.

“Please.” A hand gripped mine, real and solid, anchoring me to the present. “I know what you must think of me, but…” The voice broke off, took a ragged breath. “Don’t leave,” it whispered. “Meghan, don’t go. Come back to me.”

I sobbed in return, and opened my eyes.

The room was dark, empty. Faery light filtered through the window, casting everything in blue and silver. As usual, the air was icy cold. *A dream, then,* I thought, as the mist swirling around my head for so long finally cleared, leaving me devastatingly awake and aware. *It was a dream, after all.*

A sense of betrayal filled me. I’d come out of my lovely darkness for nothing. I wanted to retreat, to return to the oblivion where nothing could hurt me, but now that I was awake, I couldn’t go back.

An ache filled my chest, so sharp that I gasped out loud. Was this what a broken heart felt like? Was it possible to die from the pain? I’d always thought the girls at school so dramatic; when they broke up with their boyfriends, they cried and carried on for weeks. I didn’t think they needed to throw such a fuss. But I’d never been in love before.

What would I do now? Ash despised me. Everything he’d said and done was to bring me to his queen. He was a cheat. He’d *used* me, to further his own ends.

And the saddest part was, I still loved him.

Stop it! I told myself, as tears threatened once more. *Enough of this! Ash doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve anything. He’s a soulless faery who played you every step of the way, and you fell for it like an idiot.* I took a deep breath, forcing back the tears, willing them to freeze inside me, to freeze everything inside me. Emotions, tears, memories, anything that made me weak. Because if I was going to play in the Unseelie Court, I had to be made of ice. No, not ice. Like iron. *Nothing will hurt me again,* I thought, as my tears dried and my emotions shriveled into a withered ball. *If the damned faeries want to play rough, so be it. I can play rough, too.*

I threw back the covers and stood tall, the cold air prickling my skin. *Let it freeze me, I don't care.* My hair was a mess, tangled and limp, my clothes rumpled and disgusting. I peeled them off and walked into the bathroom for a long soak in the tub—the only warm place in the entire court—before dressing in black jeans, a black halter top and a long black coat. As I was finishing lacing up my black boots, Tiaothin walked into the room.

She blinked, obviously astonished to see me on my feet, before breaking into a huge grin, fangs shining in the moonlight. "You're up!" she exclaimed, bouncing over and leaping onto my bed. "You're awake. That's a relief. Mab's been annoyed and cranky ever since you collapsed. She thought you were going to sleep forever, and then she'd have a devil of a time explaining your condition to the Seelie courtiers when they come for the Exchange."

I frowned at her, and for a moment, a tiny spark of hope flickered inside. "What Exchange?" I wondered. *Have they come for me? Has Oberon finally sent someone to rescue me from this hellhole?*

Tiaothin, in that guileless way of hers, seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. "Don't worry, half-breed," she sniffed, looking at me with slitted eyes. "They're not coming for *you.* They're here to pass on the Scepter of the Seasons. Summer is finally over, and winter is on the way."

I felt a pang of disappointment and quashed it. *No weakness. Show her nothing.* I shrugged and casually asked, "What's the Scepter of the Seasons?"

Tiaothin yawned and made herself comfortable on my bed. "It's a magical talisman that the courts pass between them with the changing of the seasons," she said, picking at a loose thread on my quilt. "Six months out of the year, Oberon holds it, when spring and summer are at their peak, and winter is at its weakest. Then, on the autumn equinox, it is passed to Queen Mab, to signify the shift in power between the courts. The Summer courtiers will be arriving soon, and we'll have a huge party to celebrate the start of winter. Everyone in Tir Na Nog is invited, and the party will last for days." She grinned and bounced in place, dreadlocks flying. "It's a good thing you woke up when you did, half-breed. This is one party you don't want to miss!"

"Will Lord Oberon and Lady Titania be there?"

“Lord Pointy Ears?” Tiaothin sniffed. “He’s much too important to go slumming around with Unseelie lowlifes. Nah, Oberon and his bitch queen Titania will stay in Arcadia where they’re comfortable. Lucky thing, too. Those two stiff necks can really ruin a good party.”

So I’d be on my own after all. Fine with me.

* * *

THE SUMMER COURT ARRIVED in a hale of music and flowers, probably in direct defiance of Winter, whose traditions I was beginning to hate. I stood calf deep in snow, the collar of my fur coat turned up against cold, watching Unseelie fey mill about the courtyard. The event was to take place outside, in the courtyard full of ice and frozen statues. Will-o’-the-wisps and corpse candles floated through the air, casting everything in eternal twilight. Why couldn’t the Winter fey hold their parties aboveground for once? I missed the sunlight so much it hurt.

I felt a presence behind me, then heard a quiet chuckle in my ear. “So glad you were able to make it to the party, Princess. It would’ve been terribly boring without you.”

My skin prickled, and I squashed down my fear as Rowan’s breath tickled the back of my neck. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I replied, keeping my voice light and even. His eyes bored into my skull, but I didn’t turn. “What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“Oh ho, now we’re playing the ice queen. Bravo, Princess, bravo. Such a brave comeback from your broken heart. Not what I expected from Summer at all.” He shifted around me so that we were inches apart, so close I could see my reflection in his ice-blue eyes. “You know,” he breathed, his breath cold on my cheek, “I can help you get over him.”

I desperately wanted to back away, but I held my ground. *You are iron*, I reminded myself. *He can’t hurt you. You’re steel inside.* “The offer is appreciated,” I said, locking gazes with the sidhe prince, “but I don’t need your help. I’m already past him.”

“Are you now?” Rowan didn’t sound convinced. “You know he’s right over there, don’t you? Pretending not to watch us?” He smirked and took my hand, pressing it to his lips. My stomach fluttered before I could stop it. “Let’s show dear Ash how much you’re over him. Come on, Princess. You know you want to.”

I did want to. I wanted to hurt Ash, make him jealous, put him through the same pain I had gone through. And Rowan was right there, offering. All I had to do was lean forward and meet his smirking mouth. I hesitated. Rowan *was* gorgeous; I could do worse in the casual make-out department.

"Kiss me," Rowan whispered.

A trumpet sounded, echoing over the courtyard, and the smell of roses filled the air. The Seelie Court was arriving, to the roars and shrieks of the Winter fey.

I started, wrenching myself out of the glamour-induced daze. "Dammit, stop doing that!" I snarled, yanking my hand from his grip and stumbling back. My heart slammed against my rib cage. God, I'd almost fallen for it this time; another half second and I would have been all over him. Shame colored my cheeks.

Rowan laughed. "You're almost attractive when you blush," he snickered, moving out of slapping range. "Until next time, Princess." With another mocking bow, he slipped away.

I glanced around furtively, wondering if Ash truly was nearby and watching us, as Rowan claimed. Though I saw Sage and his enormous wolf lounging against a pillar near Mab's throne, Ash was nowhere in sight.

Two satyrs padded through the briar-covered gates of the courtyard, holding pale trumpets that looked made of bone. They raised the horns to their lips and blew a keening blast, one that set the Unseelie Court to howling. Atop her throne of ice, Mab watched the procedures with a faint smile.

"Gotcha!" hissed a voice, and something pinched me painfully on the rear. I yelped, whirling on Tiaothin, who laughed and danced away, dreadlocks flying. "You're an idiot, half-breed," she taunted, as I kicked snow at her. She dodged easily. "Rowan's too good for you, and he's experienced. Most everyone, fey and mortal boys included, would give their teeth to have him to themselves for a night. Try him. I guarantee you'll like it."

"Not interested," I snapped, glaring at her with narrowed eyes. My butt still stung, making my words sharp. "I'm done playing games with faery princes. They can go to hell, for all I care. I'd rather strip naked for a group of redcaps."

"Ooh, if you do, can I watch?"

I rolled my eyes and turned my back on her as the Seelie Court finally made its appearance. A line of white horses swept into the courtyard, their hooves floating over the ground, their eyes as blue as the summer sky. Atop saddles made of bark, twigs and flowering vines, elven knights peered down haughtily, elegant in their leafy armor. After the knights came the standard-bearers, satyrs and dwarfs bearing the colors of the Summer Court. Then, finally, an elegant carriage pulled up, wreathed in thorns and rosebushes and flanked by two grim-faced trolls who growled and bared their fangs at the crowds of Winter fey.

Tiaothin sniffed. “They’re being highly paranoid this year,” she muttered, as a troll took a swat at a goblin that edged too close. “Wonder who the high-and-mighty noble is, to warrant such security measures?”

I didn’t answer, for my skin was prickling a warning, though I didn’t know why until a moment later. The carriage rolled to a stop, the doors were opened…

And King Oberon, Lord of the Seelie Court, stepped out into the snow.

The Unseelie fey gasped and snarled, backing away from the carriage, as the Erlking swept his impassive gaze over the crowd. My heart hammered in my chest. Oberon looked as imposing as ever: slender, ancient and powerful, his silver hair falling to his waist and his eyes like pale leaves. He wore robes the color of the forest, brown and gold and green, and an antlered crown rested on his brow.

Beside me, Tiaothin gaped, flattening her ears. “Oberon?” she snarled, as I watched the Erlking’s gaze sweep the crowd, searching meticulously. “What’s Lord Pointy Ears doing here?”

I couldn’t answer, for Oberon’s piercing stare finally found me. His eyes narrowed, and I shivered under that look. The last time I’d seen the Erlking, I’d snuck away from the Seelie Court to find my brother. Oberon had sent Puck to fetch me back, and I’d convinced him to help me instead. After our rebellion and direct disobedience, I imagined the Seelie king was none too happy with either of us.

My stomach twisted and a lump rose to my throat as I thought of Puck. I managed to swallow it down before any Unseelie noticed my bout of weakness, but the memories still haunted me. I desperately wished Puck were here. I stared at the carriage, hoping his lanky, red-haired form would come leaping out, flashing that defiant smirk, but he did not appear.

“Lord Oberon,” Mab said in a neutral voice, but it was clear that she, too, was surprised to see her ancient rival. “This is a surprise. To what do we owe the honor of your visit?”

Oberon approached the throne, flanked by his two troll bodyguards. The crowd of Unseelie fey parted quickly before him, until he stood before the throne. “Lady Mab,” the Erlking said, his powerful voice echoing over the courtyard, “I have come to request the return of my daughter, Meghan Chase, to the Seelie Court.”

A murmur went through the ranks of Unseelie fey, and all eyes turned to me. *Iron,* I reminded myself. *You are like iron. Don’t let them scare you.* I stepped out from behind Tiaothin and met the surprised, angry looks head-on.

Oberon gestured at the carriage, and the trolls reached inside, dragging out two pale Winter sidhe, their arms bound behind their backs with living, writhing vines. “I have brought an exchange, as the rules dictate,” Oberon continued, as the trolls pushed the prisoners forward. “I will return to you your own, in exchange for my daughter’s freedom—”

Mab interrupted. “I’m afraid you misunderstand, Lord Oberon,” she rasped with the faintest of smiles. “Your daughter is not a prisoner of the Unseelie, but a willing guest. She came to us on her own, after making a bargain with my son to do so. The girl is bound by her contract to Prince Ash, and you have no power to demand her return. Once a bargain is made, it must be honored by all.”

Oberon stiffened, then slowly turned to me again. I gulped as those ancient-as-the-forest eyes pierced right through me. “Is this true, daughter?” he asked, and though his voice was soft, it echoed in my ears and made the ground tremble.

I bit my lip and nodded. “It’s true,” I whispered. *I guess your wolf henchman didn’t come back to tell you that part.*

The Erlking shook his head. “Then, I cannot help you. Foolish girl. You have doomed yourself to your fate. So be it.” He turned from me, a deserting gesture that spoke louder than any words, and I felt like he had punched me in the stomach. “My daughter has made her choice,” he announced. “Let us be done with this.”

That’s it? I thought as Oberon walked back toward the carriage. *You’re not going to fight to get me out, bargain with Mab for my freedom? Because of my stupid contract, you’re just going to leave me here?*

Apparently so. The Erlking didn’t look at me a second time as he reached the carriage and gestured to his trolls. One of them shoved the Unseelie prisoners back into the carriage, while the other opened the opposite door with a grunt.

A tall, regal faery stepped out into the snow. Despite her size, she looked so delicate it seemed she would break at the slightest puff of air. Her limbs were bundles of twigs, held together with woven grass. Fragile white buds grew from her scalp instead of hair. A magnificent mantle covered her shoulders, made of every flower under the sun: lilies, roses, tulips, daffodils, and plants I didn’t have a name for. Bees and butterflies flitted around her, and the smell of roses was suddenly overpowering.

She stepped forward, and the hoards of Winter fey leaped back at her approach, as if she had a disease. However, it wasn’t the flower woman all eyes were trained on, but what she held in her hands.

It was a scepter, like kings and queens used to carry, only this one wasn’t just some decorated rod. It pulsed with a soft amber glow, as if sunlight clung to the living wood, melting the snow and ice where it touched. The long handle was wrapped in vines, and the carved head of the scepter continuously sprouted flowers, buds, and tiny plants. It left a trail of leaves and petals where the lady passed, and the Winter fey kept their distance, growling and hissing.

At the foot of the throne, the lady knelt and held out the scepter in both hands, bowing her head. For a moment, Mab did nothing, simply watching the faery with an unreadable expression on her face. The rest of the Winter Court seemed to hold their breath. Then, with deliberate slowness, Mab stood and plucked the scepter from the woman’s hands. Holding it before her, the queen studied it, then raised it up for all to see.

The scepter flared, the golden aura swallowed up by icy blue. The leaves and flowers shriveled and fell away. Bees and butterflies spiraled lifelessly to the ground, their gossamer wings coated in frost. The scepter flared once more and turned to ice, sending sparkling prisms of light over the courtyard.

The faery kneeling before the queen jerked and then…she, too, shriveled away. Her gorgeous robe withered, the flowers turning black and falling to the ground. Her hair curled, becoming dry and brittle, before flaking off her scalp. I heard the snapping of twigs as her legs broke at the knees, unable to hold her up any longer. She pitched forward into the snow,

twitched once, and was still. As I watched in horror, wondering why no one went forward to help, the smell of roses faded away, and the stench of rotting vegetation filled the courtyard.

"It is done," said Oberon, his voice weary. He raised his head and met Mab's gaze. "The Exchange is complete, until the summer equinox. Now, if you will excuse us, Queen Mab. We must return to Arcadia."

Mab shot him a look that was purely predatory. "You will not stay, Lord Oberon?" she crooned. "Celebrate with us?"

"I think not, Lady." If Oberon was disturbed by the way Mab looked at him, he didn't show it. "The ending of summer is not something we look forward to. I'm afraid we will have to decline. But, be warned, Queen Mab, this is not yet over. One way or another, I will have my daughter back."

I gave a start at those words. Maybe Oberon would come through for me after all. But Mab's gaze narrowed, and she stroked the handle of the scepter.

"That sounds uncomfortably close to a threat, Erlking."

"Merely a promise, my lady." With Mab still glaring at him, Oberon deliberately turned his back on the Winter Queen and strode to the carriage. A troll opened the door for him, and the Erlking entered without a backward glance. The driver shook the reins, and the Summer entourage was off, growing smaller and smaller, until the darkness swallowed them up.

Mab smiled.

"Summer is over," she announced in her raspy voice, raising her other arm as if to embrace her waiting subjects. "Winter has come. Now, let the Revel begin!"

The Unseelie went berserk, howling, roaring and screaming into the night. Music started from somewhere, wild and dark, drums pounding out a fast, frenzied rhythm. The fey swarmed together in a chaotic, writhing mass, leaping, howling and twirling madly, rejoicing in the coming of winter.

* * *

I DIDN'T GET INTO the party. One, I wasn't in the mood, and two, dancing with the Winter fey didn't seem like such a great idea. Especially after I

saw a group of drunk, glamour-high redcaps swarm a boggart and tear it limb from limb. It was like a mosh pit from hell. Mostly I hung back in the shadows, trying to avoid notice and wondering if Mab would think me rude if I retreated to my room. Looking at the frozen statues of humans and fey scattered throughout the courtyard, I decided not to risk it.

At least Rowan was absent from the celebrations, or lurking somewhere I couldn't see. I had been bracing myself to fend off his advances all night. Ash was also mysteriously absent, which was both a relief and a disappointment. I found myself searching for him, scouring the shadows and mobs of dancing fey, looking for a familiar tousled head or the glint of a silver eye.

Stop that, I thought, when I realized what I was doing. *He's not here. And even if he was, what would you do? Ask him to dance? He's made what he thinks of you perfectly clear.*

"Excuse me, Princess."

For a moment, my heart leaped at the soft, deep voice. The voice that could either be Rowan's or Ash's, they sounded so much alike. Bracing myself, I turned, but it wasn't Ash standing there. Thankfully, it wasn't Rowan, either. It was the other brother, the oldest of the three. Sage.

Dammit, he's gorgeous also. What was with this family, that all the sons were so freaking handsome it hurt to look at them? Sage had his brothers' pale face and high cheekbones, and his eyes were chips of green ice, peering out beneath slender brows. Long black hair rippled behind him, like a waterfall of ink. His wolf sat a few paces away, watching me with intelligent golden eyes.

"Prince Sage," I greeted warily, prepared to fend off another assault. "Can I help you with anything, Your Highness?" *Or did you just come to push yourself on me like Rowan, or mock me like Ash?*

"I want to speak with you," the prince said without preamble. "Alone. Will you walk with me a bit?"

This surprised me, though I still hesitated, wary. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"The throne room," Sage replied, sweeping his gaze back to the palace. "It is my duty to guard the scepter this night, as only those with royal blood are allowed to touch it. With all the chaos from the Revel, it is best to keep the scepter away from the masses. It could get messy otherwise." When I paused, thinking, he shrugged a lean shoulder. "I will not force

you, Princess. Come with me or not, it makes no difference. I merely wanted to speak to you without Rowan, Ash, or some phouka trying to eavesdrop on the conversation."

He waited patiently as I struggled for an answer. I could refuse, but I wasn't sure I wanted to. Sage seemed straightforward, almost businesslike. Different from his brothers. He wasn't making any attempt to be charming, but he wasn't being condescending, either. And unlike Rowan, who oozed charm and malice, he wasn't using glamour, and I think that's finally what sold me.

"All right," I decided, motioning with my hand. "I'll talk with you. Lead the way."

He offered me his arm, which surprised me again. After a moment's hesitation, I took it, and we started off, his wolf trailing silently behind us.

He led me back into the palace, down empty halls swathed in ice and shadow. All the Unseelie fey were outside, dancing the night away. My footsteps echoed loudly against the hard floors; his and the wolf's made no sound at all.

"I've seen you," Sage murmured without looking at me. He turned a corner, so smoothly I stumbled to keep pace. "I've watched you with my brother. And I want to warn you, you mustn't trust him."

I almost laughed, the statement was so obvious. "Which one?" I asked bitterly.

"Either of them." He pulled me down another corridor, one I recognized. We were close to the throne room now. Sage pressed on without slowing. "You do not know the enmity between Ash and Rowan, how deep the rivalry goes. Especially on Rowan's part. The jealousy he feels for his youngest brother is a dark poison, eating him from the inside, making him bitter and vengeful. He has never forgiven Ash for Ariella's death."

We entered the throne room in all its frigid, icy beauty. Sage released me and walked toward the throne, his wolf padding behind him. I shivered, huddling deeper into my coat. It was colder in here than it was outside. "But Ash wasn't responsible for Ariella's death," I said, rubbing my forearms. "That—" I stopped, not wanting to say it out loud. *That was Puck, who led them into danger. Who was responsible for the death of Ash's love.*

Sage didn't answer. He had come to a stop a few feet beside Mab's icy throne, staring at something on the altar beside it. A moment later, I realized that was the source of the ungodly chill in the room. The Scepter of the Seasons hovered a few inches over the altar, washing the prince's face in icy blue light.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he murmured, running his fingers over the frozen handle. "Every year, I see it, and yet it never ceases to amaze me." His eyes glittered; he seemed to be in some sort of trance. "Someday, if Mab ever gets tired of being queen, it will be mine to accept, to rule with. When that happens…"

I didn't get to hear the rest, for at that moment, the wolf let out a long, low growl and bared its teeth.

Sage whirled around. In one smooth motion, he drew the sword at his waist. I stared at it. It was much like Ash's, straight and slender, the blade throwing off an icy blue aura. I shivered, remembering what it was like to grasp that hilt, feel the awful cold bite into my skin. And for a moment, I was terrified. *He's going to kill me, that's why he brought me here alone. He was going to kill me all along.*

"How did you get in here?" Sage hissed.

I turned. There, against the back wall, several dark forms melted out of the shadows. Four were thin and lanky, almost emaciated, their frames nothing but wires twisted together to form limbs and a body, resembling huge puppets as they skittered over the ground on all fours. The wolf's growls turned into snarls.

My heart turned over as another form stepped into the light, dressed in segmented metal armor emblazoned with a barbed-wire crown. He wore a helmet, but the visor was up, showing a face as familiar to me as my own. There was no mistaking that pale skin, those intense gray eyes. Ash's face gazed out at me from under the helmet, his eyes as bleak as the winter sky.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Theft

“Ash?” Sage muttered in disbelief. I shook my head mutely, but the prince wasn’t looking at me.

The knight blinked, giving Sage a solemn look. “I’m afraid not, Prince Sage,” he said, and I shivered at how much he sounded like his double. “Your brother was simply the blueprint for my creation.”

“Tertius,” I whispered, and Ash’s doppelgänger gave me a pained smile. The last time I’d seen the Iron knight was in Machina’s tower just before it came crashing down. I couldn’t imagine how he’d survived. “What are you doing here?”

Tertius’s gaze met mine, his eyes blank and dead, looking so much like Ash’s it made my heart ache. “Forgive me, Princess,” he murmured, and made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

With shrieks like knives scraping against each other, the Iron faeries rushed me.

They were appallingly fast, scuttling gray blurs across the floor. I had the absurd image of being ambushed by a swarm of metallic spiders before they were upon me. The first attacker leaped up and slashed at my face with a twisted wire claw as sharp as any razor.

It met a gleaming blue sword instead, screeching off the blade in a volley of sparks, bringing tears to my eyes. Sage threw back one attacker and whirled to meet the next, ducking as wire talons slashed over his head. The Winter prince thrust out a palm, and a jagged ice spear surged out of the floor, stabbing toward the Iron fey. Lightning fast, they dodged, leaping back and giving us time to retreat. Grabbing my wrist, Sage yanked me behind the throne.

“Keep out of the way,” he ordered, just as the faeries descended on us again, swarming over the chair and leaving deep gouges in the ice. Sage slashed at one, only to have it spring back. Another darted in from behind,

lashing out with steel talons. The prince dodged, but he didn't move fast enough, and a bright splash of blood colored the floor.

My stomach twisted as the prince staggered, swinging his blade in a desperate circle to keep the assassins back. There were too many for him, and they were too quick. Frantically, I looked around for a weapon, but saw only the scepter, lying on the pedestal near the throne. Knowing I was probably breaking a dozen sacred rules, I lunged for the scepter and snatched it up by its frozen handle.

The cold seared my hands, burning them like acid. I gasped and nearly dropped it, gritting my teeth against the pain. Sage stood in the middle of a slashing whirlwind, desperately trying to keep them back. I saw lines of red on his face and chest. Trying to ignore the searing pain, I rushed up behind an Iron fey, raised the scepter over my head and smashed it down on the faery's spindly back.

It whirled with blinding speed. I didn't even see the blow until it backhanded me across the face, making lights explode behind my eyes. I flew back into a corner, striking my head on something hard and slumping to the floor. The scepter dropped from my grasp and rolled away. Dazed, I watched the faery scuttle toward me but suddenly jerk to a stop, as if yanked by invisible strings. Ice covered its body, pushing up through the seams in the wire as the faery clawed at itself frantically. Wire-thin fingers snapped off, and the faery's struggles slowed before it curled in on itself like a giant insect and stopped moving altogether.

I didn't have the breath to scream. I tried pushing away from the wall, but everything spun violently and my stomach lurched. I heard footsteps coming toward me and opened my eyes to see Tertius bend down and take the Scepter of the Seasons.

"Don't," I managed, trying to struggle to my feet. The ground swayed, and I stumbled back. "What are you doing?"

He observed me with solemn gray eyes. "Following the orders of my king."

"King?" I struggled to focus. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. A few feet away, Sage and the assassins fought on. The wolf had its jaws clamped around a faery's leg, and Sage pressed it unmercifully with his sword. "You don't have a king anymore," I told Tertius, feeling light-headed and numb. "Machina is dead."

“Yes, but our realm endures. I follow the commands of the new Iron King,” Tertius murmured, drawing his sword. I stared at the steel blade, hoping it would be quick. “I bear you no ill will, this time. My orders do not include killing you. But I must obey my lord.”

And with that, Tertius spun on his heel and marched away, still holding the Scepter of the Seasons. It pulsed blue and white in his hands, coating his gauntlets with frost, but he did not fumble. His face was grim as he strode up behind Sage, still locked in battle with the assassins. The wolf thrashed on the ground in a pool of blood, and Sage’s breaths came in ragged gasps as he fought on alone. In horror, I saw what Tertius was going to do and screamed out a warning.

Too late. As Sage cut viciously at one of the Iron fey, he didn’t see Tertius looming behind him until the knight was right there. Aware of the danger at last, Sage whirled, swinging his sword, cutting at Tertius’s head. The knight knocked the blade aside and, as Sage staggered back, took one step forward and plunged his own sword through the Winter prince’s chest.

Time seemed to stop. Sage stood there a moment, a look of shock on his face, staring at the blade in his chest. His own sword hit the ground with a ringing clang.

Then Tertius yanked the blade free, and I gasped. Sage crumpled to the floor, blood pooling from his chest and streaming onto the ice. The assassins tensed to pounce on him, but Tertius blocked them with his sword.

“Enough. We have what we came for. Let’s go.” He flicked blood off the blade and sheathed it, his eyes moving to the corpse of the frozen assassin. “Fetch your brother, quickly. We can leave no evidence behind.”

The Iron fey scrambled to comply, lifting the dead faery onto their shoulders, careful not to touch the ice piercing its skin. They even grabbed the pieces off the floor. Tertius turned to me, his gaze bleak, as darkness hovered on the edge of my vision. “Farewell, Meghan Chase. I hope we do not meet again.” He spun quickly to follow the assassins, marching out of my line of sight. I turned my head to follow them, but they were already gone.

* * *

MY HEAD THROBBED, and darkness threatened at the edges of my vision; I took several deep breaths to drive it back. I would *not* pass out now. Gradually, the churning blackness cleared, and I pulled myself upright, looking around. The throne room had fallen silent again, except for the slow thudding of my heart, which sounded unnaturally loud in my ears. Blood flecked the walls and pooled along the floor, horribly vivid against the pale ice. The altar that had held the Scepter of the Seasons lay empty and bare.

My gaze wandered to the two bodies still in the room with me. Sage lay on his back, his sword a few inches from his hand, gazing up at the ceiling, gasping. A few feet away, the furry body of the wolf, gray fur streaked with blood, lay crumpled on the ice.

Limping, I ran over to Sage, passing the body of the poor wolf, sprawled out next to him. The wolf's jaws gaped open, and a tongue lolled out between bloody teeth. It had died protecting its master, and I felt sick at the thought.

Just as I reached Sage, a shudder went through the prince's body. His head arced back, mouth gaping, and ice crawled up from his lips, spreading over his face, down his chest, and all the way to his feet. He stiffened as the air chilled around us, the ice making sharp crinkling sounds as it encased the prince in a crystal cocoon.

No. I looked closer, and realized Sage's *body* was turning to ice. His clawed fingers flexed, losing their color, becoming hard and clear. His thumb abruptly snapped off and shattered on the floor. I put both hands to my mouth to keep from screaming. Or vomiting. Sage gave a final jerk and was still, a cold, hard statue where a live body had been a moment before.

The oldest son of the Winter Court was dead.

And that's how Tiaothin found us a moment later.

Later, I didn't recall much of that moment, but I did remember the phouka's screech of horror and fury as she fled to tell the rest of the court. I heard her shrill voice echoing down the corridor, and knew I should probably move, but I was cold, numb to all feeling. I didn't leave the prince's side until Rowan swept in with a platoon of guards, who pounced on me with angry cries. Rough hands grabbed me by the arms and hair, dragging me away from Sage's body, oblivious to my protests and cries of

pain. I shouted at Rowan to tell him what had happened, but he wasn't looking at me.

Behind him, Unseelie fey crowded into the room, and roars of fury and outrage filled the chamber when they saw the dead prince. Fey were screaming and crying, tearing at themselves and each other, demanding vengeance and blood. Dazed, I realized the Unseelie were outraged at the murder of a Winter prince in their own territory. That someone had dared slip in and kill one of their own, right under their noses. There was no sorrow or remorse for the prince himself, only fury and demands for revenge at the audacity of it. I wondered if anyone would truly miss the eldest prince of Winter.

Rowan stood over Sage's body, his expression eerily blank as he stared down at his brother. Amid the roars and cries of the fey around us, he regarded his sibling with the curiosity one might show a dead bird on the sidewalk. It made my skin crawl.

Silence fell over the room, and a chill descended like an icy blanket. I twisted in my captor's grasp and saw Mab standing in the doorway, her gaze locked on Sage's body. Everyone backed away as she entered the throne room. You could hear a pin drop as the queen walked up to Sage's body, bending down to touch his cold, frozen cheek. I shivered, for the temperature was still dropping. Even some of the Winter fey looked uncomfortable as new icicles formed on the ceiling and frost crept over skin and fur. Mab was still bent over Sage, her expression unreadable, but her mulberry lips parted and mouthed a single word. "Oberon."

Then she screamed, and the world shattered. Icicles exploded, flying outward like crystallized shrapnel, pelting everyone with glittering shards. The walls and floor cracked, and fey screeched as they disappeared into the gaping holes.

"Oberon!" Mab raged again, whirling around with a terrifying, crazy look in her eyes. "He did this! This is his revenge! Oh, Summer will pay! They will pay until they are screaming for mercy, but they will find no pity among the Winter Court! We will repay this heinous act in kind, my subjects! Prepare for war!"

"No!" My voice was drowned out in the roar that went up from the Unseelie fey. Twisting out of my captor's grip, I staggered into the middle of the room.

“Queen Mab,” I gasped, as Mab swung the full brunt of her terrible gaze on me. Madness warred with the fury in her eyes, and I shrank back in terror. “Please, listen to me! Oberon didn’t do this! The Summer Court didn’t kill Sage, it was the Iron King. The Iron fey did this!”

“Be silent!” hissed the queen, baring her teeth. “I will not listen to your pathetic attempts to protect your wretched family, not when the Summer King threatened me in my own court. Your sire has murdered my son, and you will be silent, or I will forget myself and give him an eye for an eye!”

“But, it’s true!” I insisted, though my brain was screaming at me to shut up. I glanced around desperately and spotted Rowan, looking on with a faint smile. Ash would back me up, but Ash, as usual, wasn’t here when I needed him. “Rowan, please. Help me out. I’m not lying, you know I’m not.”

He regarded me with a solemn expression, and for a moment I really thought he would come through, before a corner of his mouth curled nastily. “It isn’t nice to deceive the queen, Princess,” he said, looking grim apart from the sneer in his eyes. “If these Iron fey were a threat, we would have seen them by now, don’t you think?”

“But they do exist!” I cried, on the verge of panic now. “*I’ve* seen them, and they *are* a threat!” I turned back to Mab. “What about the huge, fire-breathing iron horse that almost killed your son? You don’t think that’s a threat? Call Ash,” I said. “He was there when we fought Ironhorse and Machina. He’ll back me up.”

“*Enough*!” Mab screeched, whirling on me. “Half-breed, you go too far! Your line has already robbed me of a son, and you will not touch another! I know you seek to turn my youngest against me with your blasphemous claims of love, and *I will not have it!*” She pointed a manicured nail at me, and a flare of blue-white shot between us as I stumbled back. “You will be silent, once and for all!”

Something gripped my feet, holding them fast. I looked down to see ice creeping up my legs, moving faster than I’d seen before. In the space of a blink, it had flowed up my waist and continued over my stomach and chest. Icy needles stabbed my skin as I wrapped my arms around myself, just before they were frozen to my chest. And still, the ice came on, creeping up my neck, burning my chin. Panic gripped me as it covered my lower jaw, and I screamed as ice flooded my mouth. Before I could suck in

another breath, it covered my nose, my cheekbones, my eyes, and finally reached the top of my head. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. My lungs burned for air, but my mouth and nose were filled with ice. I was drowning, suffocating, and my skin felt like it was being peeled away by the cold. I wanted to pass out, I longed for darkness to take me, but though I couldn't breathe and my lungs screamed for oxygen, I didn't die.

Beyond the wall of ice, everything had fallen silent. Mab stood before me, her expression torn between triumph and hate. She turned back to her subjects, who watched her with wary eyes, as if she might lash out at them, too.

"Make ready, my subjects!" the queen rasped, raising her arms. "The war with Summer starts now!"

Another roar, and the minions of the Unseelie Court scattered, leaving the room with raucous battle cries. Mab spared me one more glance over her shoulder, her lips curling into a snarl before she walked out. Rowan stared at me a moment longer, snickered, and followed his queen from the room. Silence fell, and I was left alone, dying but unable to die.

When you can't breathe, each second feels like an eternity. My entire existence shrank into trying to draw air into my lungs. Though my head knew it was impossible, my body couldn't understand. I could feel my heart thudding laboriously against my ribs; I could feel the hideous chill of the ice, searing my skin. My body knew it was still alive and continued its fight to live.

I don't know how long I stood there, hours or only a few minutes, when a shadowy figure slipped into the room. Though I could still see out, the ice made everything cracked and distorted, so I couldn't tell who it was. The shadow hesitated in the doorway, watching me for a long moment. Then, quickly, it glided across the room until it stood next to my prison, laying a pale hand against the ice.

"Meghan," a voice whispered. "It's me."

Even through my air-starved delirium, my heart leaped. Ash's silvery eyes peered through the wall separating us, as bright and soulful as ever. The torment on his face shocked me, as if he were the one trapped and unable to breathe.

"Hang on," he murmured, pressing his forehead to mine through the wall. "I'm getting you out of there." He leaned back, both hands against

the ice, and closed his eyes. The air began to vibrate; a tremor shook the walls around me, and tiny cracks spider-webbed through the ice.

With the sound of breaking glass, the prison shattered, shards flying outward but somehow leaving me unscathed. My legs buckled and I fell, choking and coughing, vomiting up water and ice shards. Ash knelt beside me and I clung to him, gasping air into my starved lungs, feeling the world spin around me.

Somehow, through the dizzying rush of air, the relief at being able to breathe again, I noticed that Ash was holding me, too. His arms were locked around my shoulders, pressing me to his chest, his cheek resting against my wet hair. I heard his rapid heartbeat, pounding against my ear, and strangely, that calmed me down a little.

The moment ended too soon. Ash pulled away, dropping his black coat around my shoulders. I clutched at it gratefully, shivering. “Can you walk?” he whispered, and his voice was urgent. “We have to get out of here, now.”

“W-where are we g-going?” I asked, my teeth chattering. He didn’t answer, only pulled me to my feet, his gaze darting about warily. Grabbing my wrist, he started leading me from the room.

“Ash,” I panted, “wait!” He didn’t slow down. My nerves jangled a warning. With all my strength, I stopped dead in the middle of the floor and yanked my hand out of his grip. He whirled, eyes narrowing to slits, and I remembered all the things he’d said to Rowan, that everything he’d done was in service to his queen. I quickly backed out of his reach. “Where are you taking me?” I demanded.

He looked impatient, stabbing his fingers through his hair in an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. “Back to Seelie territory,” he snapped, reaching for me again. “You can’t be here now, not when a war is about to start. I’ll get you safely over to your side and then I’m done with this.”

It felt as if he’d slapped me. Fear and anger flared, making me stupid, making me want to hurt him all over again. “Why should I trust you?” I snarled, throwing the words at him like stones. I was completely aware that I was being an idiot, that we needed to get out of there before anyone saw us, but it was like I’d eaten spill-your-guts again, and words just kept pouring out. “You’ve misled me from the beginning. Everything you said,

everything we did, that was all a ploy to bring me here. You set me up from the very start."

"Meghan—"

"Shut up! I hate you!" I was on a roll now, and had the vindictive pleasure of seeing Ash flinch as if I'd struck him. "You're a real piece of work, you know? Is this a game you like to play? Make the stupid human girl fall for you and then laugh as you rip her heart out? You knew what Rowan was doing, and you didn't do anything to stop it!"

"Of course not!" Ash snarled back, his vehemence startling me into silence. "Do you know what Rowan would do if he found out…what we did? Do you know what *Mab* would do? I had to make them believe I didn't care, or they would've torn you apart." He sighed wearily, giving me a solemn look. "Emotions are a weakness here, Meghan. And the Winter Court preys on the weak. They would've hurt you to get to me. Now, come on." He reached for me again, and I let him take my hand without protest. "Let's get out of here before it's too late."

"I'm afraid it's already too late," drawled a snide, familiar voice, making my heart stop. Ash jerked to a halt, yanking me behind him, as Rowan stepped out of the hallway, grinning like a cat. "I'm afraid your time just ran out."

CHAPTER FIVE

Brothers

"Hello, Ash." The older prince smiled gleefully as he sauntered into the room. His gaze met mine, and he raised a sardonic eyebrow. "And what, may I ask, are you doing with the half-breed? Could it be you're actually helping her escape? Oh dear, what a dreadfully treasonous idea you've come up with. I'm sure Mab will be quite disappointed in you."

Ash said nothing, but his hand on mine clenched tight. Rowan chuckled, circling us like a hungry shark. Ash moved with him, keeping his body between me and Rowan. "So, little brother," the older prince mused, adopting an inquisitive expression, "I'm curious. What made you risk everything for our wayward princess here?" Ash said nothing, and Rowan *tsked.* "Don't be stubborn, little brother. You might as well tell me, before Mab tears you limb from limb and banishes you from Tir Na Nog. What is the price of such loyal obedience? A contract? A promise? What is the little harlot giving you to betray your entire court?"

"Nothing." Ash's voice was cold, but I caught the faintest tremor below the surface. Rowan apparently did as well, for his eyebrows shot up and he gaped at his brother, before throwing back his head with a wild laugh.

"I can't believe it," Rowan gasped, staring at Ash in disbelief. "You're *in love* with the Summer whelp!" He paused and, when Ash didn't deny it, collapsed into shrieking laughter again. "Oh, this is rich. This is too perfect. I thought the half-breed was a fool, pining for the unattainable Ice prince, but it seems I was wrong. Ash, you've been holding out on us."

Ash trembled, but he didn't release my hand. "I'm taking her back to Arcadia. Get out of our way, Rowan."

Rowan sobered immediately. "Oh, I don't think so, little brother." He smiled, but it was a cruel thing, sharp as the edge of a blade. "When Mab finds out, you'll *both* be decorating the courtyard. If she's feeling

merciful, maybe she'll freeze you two together. That would be tragically fitting, don't you think?"

I shuddered. The thought of returning to that cold, airless, living death was too much. I couldn't do it; I'd rather die first. And the thought of Ash having to endure it with me for hundreds of years was even more horrifying. I squeezed Ash's hand and pressed my face into his shoulder, glaring at Rowan for all I was worth.

"Of course," Rowan went on, scratching the side of his face, "you could always beg forgiveness, drag the half-breed to the queen, and still be in Mab's favor. In fact," he continued, snapping his fingers, "if you go to Mab right now and turn over the princess, I'll even keep my mouth shut about what I saw here. She won't hear a peep out of me, I swear."

Ash went rock still; I could feel muscles coiling beneath his skin, the tension lining his back.

"Come on, little brother." Rowan leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. "You know it's for the best. There are only two choices here. Hand over the princess, or die with her."

Ash finally moved, as if coming out of a trance. "No," he whispered, and I heard the pain in his voice as he came to some terrible decision. "There is one more."

Releasing my hand, he took one deliberate step forward and drew his sword. Rowan's eyebrows shot up as Ash pointed his blade at him, a cold mist writhing along its edge. For a moment, there was absolute silence.

"Get out of the way, Rowan," Ash growled. "Move, or I'll kill you."

Rowan's face changed. In one instant, it went from arrogant, condescending and evilly smug, to something completely alien and terrifying. He pushed himself from the archway, his eyes gleaming with predatory hunger, and slowly drew his sword. It sent a raspy shiver echoing across the hall as it came into view, the blade thin and serrated like the edge of a shark's tooth.

"You sure about this, little brother?" Rowan crooned, flourishing his weapon as he stepped up to meet Ash. "Will you betray everything—your court, your queen, your own blood—for her? You can't change your mind once you start down this path."

"Meghan," Ash said, his voice so soft I nearly lost it. "Get back. Don't try to help me."

“Ash…” I wanted to say something. I knew I should stop this, this fight between brothers, but at the same time I knew Rowan would never let us go. Ash knew it, too, and I could see the reluctance in his eyes as he steeled himself for battle. He didn’t want to fight his brother, but he would…for me.

They faced each other across the icy room, two statues each waiting for the other to make the first move. Ash had taken a battle stance, his sword out in front of him, his expression reluctant but unwavering. Rowan held his blade casually at his side, tip pointing toward the floor, smirking at his opponent. Neither of them seemed to breathe.

Then Rowan grinned, a predator baring his fangs. “All right, then,” he muttered, sweeping up his blade in a blindingly quick move. “I think I’m going to enjoy this.”

He lunged at Ash, his sword a jagged blur through the air. Ash brought his weapon up, and icy sparks flew as the blades screeched against each other. Snarling, Rowan cut viciously at his brother, advancing with a series of savage head strikes. Ash blocked, ducked, and suddenly lunged, stabbing at Rowan’s throat. But Rowan spun gracefully aside, his sword licking out and back again. Ash whirled with inhuman speed, and would’ve cut him in two if the older prince hadn’t leaped back.

Smiling, Rowan raised his weapon, and I gasped. The gleaming point was smeared with crimson. “First blood to me, little brother,” he taunted, as a trickle of red began to drip from Ash’s sword arm, speckling the floor. “There’s still time to stop this. Turn over the princess and beg for Mab’s mercy. And mine.”

“You have no mercy, Rowan,” Ash growled, and lunged at him again.

This time, they both moved so quickly, twisting, jumping, spinning aside and slashing with their blades, it was hard to see it as anything but a beautifully timed dance. In fast-forward. Sparks flew, and the sound of blades clashing echoed off the walls. Blood appeared on both swords, and red splattered the floor around the combatants, but I couldn’t see who had the advantage.

Rowan suddenly knocked Ash’s blade aside, then thrust out his hand, sending a jagged spear of ice at his brother’s face. Ash threw himself backward to avoid it, hitting the floor and rolling to his knees. As Rowan brought his sword down at his kneeling opponent and I screamed in fear, Ash ducked aside, letting the blade miss him by centimeters. Grabbing

Rowan's arm, letting his brother's momentum carry him forward, Ash spun and threw him to the floor. Rowan's head struck the ice, and I heard the breath leave his body in a startled *whoof*. Quick as a snake, Rowan flipped over, sword in hand, but by that time, Ash had his blade at his throat.

Rowan glared at his brother, his face twisted into a mask of pain and hate. Both were panting, dripping blood from numerous wounds, yet Ash's grip was steady as he pressed the blade against Rowan's neck.

The older prince chuckled, raised his head and spit blood in Ash's face. "Go on then, little brother," he challenged, as Ash winced but didn't shy away. "Do it. You've betrayed your queen, sided with the enemy, drawn a sword against your own brother…you might as well add slaughtering your family to the list as well. Then you can run off with the half-breed and live out your sordid fantasy. I wonder how Ariella would feel, if she knew how easily she's been replaced."

"Don't talk about her!" Ash snarled, raising the hilt as if he really would thrust the sword through Rowan's throat. "Ariella is gone. Not a day goes by that I don't think of her, but she's gone, and there's nothing I can do about it." He took a deep breath to calm himself, the longing on his face plain to see. A lump caught in my throat, and I turned away, blinking back tears. No matter how much I loved this dark, beautiful prince, I could never match what he'd already lost.

Rowan sneered, narrowing his eyes. "Ariella was too good for you," he hissed, raising himself up on his elbows. "You failed her. If you'd really loved her, she would still be here."

Ash flinched, as if struck a physical blow, and Rowan pressed his advantage. "You never saw what a good thing you had," he continued, sitting up as Ash backed away a step. "She's dead because of you, because you couldn't protect her! And now you disgrace her memory with this half-breed abomination."

Pale, Ash glanced at me, and I saw Rowan's arm move a second too late. "Ash!" I cried, as the older prince leaped up and lunged with frightening speed. "Look out!"

Ash was already moving, the honed reflexes of a fighter kicking in even when his mind was elsewhere. Leaping back, his sword came up as Rowan slashed at him with a dagger that appeared from nowhere, and Rowan's lunge carried him right onto the point of Ash's blade.

Both brothers froze, and I bit down a scream. For a moment, everything ground to an abrupt halt, frozen in time. Rowan blinked and looked down at the blade in his stomach, his eyes wide and confused. Ash was staring at his hand in horror.

Then Rowan staggered back, dropping the knife and leaning against a wall, his arms around his gut. Blood streamed between his hands, staining the white fabric crimson.

"Congratulations…little brother." His voice came out choked, though his eyes were clear as he nodded at Ash, still frozen in shock. "You finally…managed to kill me."

Pounding footsteps echoed in the hall, and faint shouts carried into the throne room. I wrenched my eyes from Rowan's bloody form and ran to Ash, who was still staring at his brother in a horrified daze.

"Ash!" I grabbed his arm, snapping him out of his trance. "Someone's coming!"

"Yes, run away with…your half-breed, Ash." Rowan coughed, a line of blood trickling from his mouth. "Before Mab comes in…and sees that her last son is dead to her. I don't think you can do anything more…to betray your court."

The voices were getting louder. Ash shot Rowan one last guilty, agonized look, then grabbed my wrist and ran for the door.

I don't remember how we made it out. Ash pulled me along like a madman, running through hallways I didn't recognize. It was a miracle we didn't run into anyone, as footsteps and sounds of pursuit echoed all around us. Maybe it wasn't coincidence at all, as Ash seemed to know exactly where he was going. Twice, he yanked me into a corner and pressed his body up against mine, whispering at me to be silent and not move. I froze as a gang of redcaps skittered past, snarling and waving knives at one another, but they didn't notice us. The second time, a pale woman in a bloody dress floated by, and my heart thudded so loudly I was sure she would hear, but she drifted past without seeing.

We fled down a cold, empty corridor with icicles growing from the ceiling like chandeliers, flickering with a soft blue light. Ash finally pulled me through a door with the silhouette of a bone-white tree emblazoned on the front. The room beyond was rather small and sparsely decorated with a tall bookshelf, a dresser made of polished black wood, and an impressive knife collection on the far wall. A simple bed sat in the

corner, the blankets pulled tight, looking as if it hadn't been used in decades. Everything looked exceptionally clean, neat and Spartan, not like a prince's bedroom at all.

Ash sighed and finally released me, leaning against the wall with his head back. Blood soaked his shirt, leaving dark stains against the black material, and my stomach turned.

"We should clean those," I said. "Where do you keep the bandages?" Ash looked right through me, his eyes glassy and blank. The shock was taking a toll on him. I bit down my fear and faced him, trying to sound calm and reasonable. "Ash, do you have any rags or towels lying around? Something to stop the bleeding?"

He stared at me a moment, then shook himself and nodded to the corner. "Dresser," he muttered, sounding more weary than I'd ever heard him. "There's a jar of salve in the top drawer. *She* kept it…for emergencies…"

I didn't know what he meant by that, but I walked over to the dresser and yanked open the top drawer. It held an assortment of weird things: dead flowers, a blue silk ribbon, a glass dagger with an intricately carved bone handle. I rummaged around and found a jar of herb-scented cream, nearly empty, sitting on an old, bloodstained cloth. In the corner sat a roll of what looked like gauze made of spiderwebs.

As I pulled them out, a thin silver chain came with the gauze and slithered to the floor. Bending down to pick it up, I saw two rings attached to the links, one large and one small, and what Ash said finally sank in.

This—this drawer full of odds and ends—was Ariella's, where Ash kept all his memories of her. The dagger was hers, the ribbon was hers. The rings, exquisitely designed with tiny leaves etched in silver and gold, were a matching set.

I replaced the chain and shut the drawer, a cold knot settling in my stomach. If I ever needed proof that Ash still loved Ariella, here it was.

My eyes stung, and I blinked them angrily. Now was not the time for a jealous tantrum. I turned and found Ash watching me, his eyes dull and bleak. I took a deep breath. "Um, I think you'll have to take off your shirt," I whispered.

He complied, pushing himself away from the wall, leaving a smear of red. Removing his tattered shirt, he tossed it on the floor and turned back

to me. I tried hard not to stare at the lean, muscular chest, though my mouth went dry and my face burned crimson.

"Should I sit?" he muttered, helping me along. Gratefully, I nodded. He moved to the bed, easing himself down on the mattress with his back to me. The wounds on his shoulder and ribs seeped crimson against his pale skin.

You can do this, Meghan. Carefully, I moved up behind him, shuddering at the long, jagged cuts across his flesh. There was so much blood. I dabbed at it gingerly, not wanting to hurt him, but he didn't make a sound. When the blood was gone, I dipped two fingers in the salve and touched it lightly to the gash on his shoulder.

He made a small noise, like an exhalation of breath, and slumped forward, head down and hair covering his eyes. "Don't worry about hurting me," he muttered without looking up. "I'm…fairly used to this."

I nodded and applied more salve to the wound, liberally this time. He didn't flinch, though his shoulders were taut and rigid beneath my fingertips; I could feel the tight coil of muscles beneath my hands. I wondered if Ariella used to do this for him, in this very bedroom, patching him up whenever he was hurt. Judging from the pale scars across his back, this wasn't the first time he'd been wounded in a deadly fight. Had she felt the same as me, angry and terrified whenever Ash put himself in mortal danger?

My eyes grew blurry. I tried blinking, but it was no use. Retrieving the gauze, I wrapped it around his shoulder, biting my lip to keep silent as tears streamed down my face.

"I'm sorry."

He hadn't moved, and his voice was so soft I barely heard it, but I still almost dropped the gauze. Tying it off, I didn't answer as I went to work on his ribs, winding the bandages around his waist. Ash sat perfectly still, barely breathing. A teardrop fell from my chin to land on his back, and he flinched.

"Meghan?"

"Why are you apologizing?" My voice came out shakier than I wanted it to, and I swallowed hard. "You already told me why you were being a bastard. You had to protect me from your family and the Winter Court. They were perfectly good reasons." *Not that I'm bitter or anything.*

“I didn’t want to hurt you.” Ash’s voice was still soft, hesitant. “I thought that if I could make you hate me, it would be easier when you returned to your world.” He paused, and his next words were almost a whisper. “What I said in the courtyard…Rowan would have tormented you even more if he knew.”

I finished binding his ribs and pulled the wrappings tight around his waist. My eyes still streamed, but they were different tears now. I didn’t miss the subtle phrasing: when you return to your world. Not *if*. When. As though he knew I would go back someday, and we would never see each other again.

Still silent, I picked up the jar and returned it to the dresser. I didn’t want to face him now. I didn’t want to think that he could be gone from my life forever, vanishing back into a world where I couldn’t follow.

“Meghan.” Ash turned and grabbed my hand, sending tingles up my arm. Against my will, I looked down at him. His face was desolate, his eyes pleading for understanding. “I can’t…have feelings for you,” he murmured, tearing a hole right through my heart. “Not in the way you want. Whatever happens, Mab is still my queen, and the Winter Court is my home. What happened in Machina’s realm…” His brow knitted, and his expression darkened with pain. “We have to forget that, and move on. Once I take you to Arcadia’s borders and you’re safe with Oberon, you won’t see me again.”

The pain in my heart became a sick and fiery gnawing. I stared at him, hoping he would take it back, tell me he was kidding. He withdrew his hand and stood, facing me with a deeply sorrowful expression. “I’m sorry,” he murmured again, avoiding my eyes. “It’s…better this way.”

“No.” I shook my head as he drew away, brushing past me. I whirled to follow him, reaching for his arm, missing. “Ash, wait—”

“Don’t make this harder.” He opened his closet and pulled out a tight gray shirt, shrugging into it with barely a wince. “I…killed Rowan.” He closed his eyes, struggling with the memory. “I’m a kinslayer. There’s nothing left in my future now, so be glad you won’t be around to see what happens.”

“What will you do?”

He grimaced. “Return to court. Try to forget.” Reaching into the closet, he pulled out a long black coat crossed with silver chains and drew it over

his shoulders. “Throw myself on Mab’s mercy and hope she doesn’t kill me.”

“You can’t!”

He faced me fully, the coat swirling around him. Just like that, he became something cold and remote, a deadly beautiful faery, unearthly and unreachable. “Don’t get involved in fey politics, Meghan,” he said darkly, shutting the closet door. “Mab will find me, no matter what I do or how far I run. And with the war approaching, Winter will need every soldier it can get. Until Summer returns the scepter, Mab will be relentless.”

He turned away, but mention of the war reminded me of something else. “The scepter. Ash, wait!” I grabbed his sleeve, ignoring the way he went perfectly still. “It wasn’t the Summer Court!” I blurted before he could say anything. “It was the Iron fey. I saw them.” He frowned, and I leaned forward, willing him to believe me. “It was Tertius, Ash. Tertius killed Sage.”

He stared at me blankly for a moment, and I held my breath, watching his expression. Out of everyone in the Winter Court, Ash was the only one to actually see the Iron fey. If he didn’t believe me, I didn’t have a chance of convincing anyone else.

“Are you sure?” he murmured after a few seconds. Relief flooded me, and I nodded vigorously. “Why? Why would the Iron fey steal the scepter? How did they even get inside?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they want its power? Or maybe they took it to start a war between the courts. They accomplished that much at least.”

“I have to tell the queen.”

“No!” I moved to block him, and he glared at me. “Ash, she won’t believe you,” I said desperately. “I tried to tell her, and she turned me into an icicle. She’s convinced it’s Oberon’s doing.”

“She’ll listen to me.”

“Are you sure? With everything you’ve done? Will she listen to you after you saved me and killed Rowan?” His expression darkened, and I ignored the guilt stabbing holes in my chest. “We have to go after them,” I whispered, suddenly sure of what we had to do. “We have to find Tertius and get the scepter back. It’s the only way to stop the war. Mab will have to believe us then, right?”

Ash hesitated. For a moment, he looked terribly unsure, balanced between me and duty to his queen. He raked a hand through his hair, and I

saw the indecision in his eyes. But before he could reply, a sudden scratching on his door made us both jump.

We exchanged a glance. Drawing his sword and motioning me back, Ash strode to the door and warily cracked it open. There was a streak of dark fur, and a cat darted through the opening. I yelped in surprise.

Ash sheathed his blade. “Tiaothin,” he muttered, as the phouka shed the feline form for her more human one. “What’s happening out there? What’s going on?”

The phouka grinned at him, slitted eyes bright and eager. “The soldiers are everywhere,” she announced, twitching her tail. “They’ve sealed all doors into and out of the palace, and everyone is looking for you and the half-breed.” She spared me a glance and chuckled. “Mab is *pissed.* You should go now, if you’re going. The elite guard are on their way right now.”

I looked to Ash, pleading. He glanced at me, then back to the door, his expression torn. Then, he shook his head as if he couldn’t believe he was doing this. “This way,” he snapped, yanking open the closet. “Inside, now.”

I crossed the threshold into the small, dark space and looked back for Ash. He paused at the frame, glancing at the phouka dancing in the middle of the room. “Lie low after this, Tiaothin,” he warned. “Stay out of Mab’s way for a while. Got it?”

The phouka grinned, mischief written on every inch of her smile. “And what fun would that be?” she said, sticking out her tongue. Before Ash could argue, her ears twitched backward and she jerked her head up. “They’re almost here. Go, I’ll lead them away. No one does a wild-goose chase better than a phouka.” And before we could stop her, she ran to the door, flung it open and leaned into the hall. “The prince!” she screeched, her shrill voice echoing down the corridor. “The prince and the half-breed! I saw them! Follow me!”

We ducked into the closet as the sound of booted feet thundered past the door, following Tiaothin as she led them away. Ash sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “Idiot phouka,” he muttered.

“Will she be all right?”

Ash snorted. “Tiaothin can handle herself better than anyone I know. That’s why I asked her to keep an eye on you.”

So that’s why the phouka was so interested. “I didn’t need babysitting,” I said, both annoyed and thrilled that he’d thought to look out for me when

he couldn’t be there.

Ash ignored me. Putting a hand to the wall, he closed his eyes and muttered several strange, unfamiliar words under his breath. A thin rectangle of light appeared, and Ash pulled open another door, bathing the room in pale light and revealing an icy staircase plunging into darkness.

“Come on.” He turned to me and held out a hand. “This will take us out of the palace, but we have to hurry before it disappears.”

Behind us, a roar of discovery echoed through the hall, as something poked its head in the room and bellowed for its friends. I grabbed Ash’s hand, and we fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

The Goblin Market

I followed Ash down the glittering staircase and through a narrow corridor studded with leering gargoyles and flickering blue torches. We didn't speak; the only sounds were our footsteps echoing off the stones and my ragged breathing. Several times, the tunnel split off in different directions, but Ash always chose a path without hesitation. I was glad for the long winter coat around my shoulders; the temperature here was frigid, and my breath clouded the air as we ran, listening for sounds of pursuit.

The passage abruptly dead-ended, a solid wall of ice blocking our path. I wondered if we'd taken a wrong turn, but Ash released me and walked forward, placing one hand against the ice. With sharp, crinkly sounds, it parted under his fingers, until another tunnel stretched away before us, ending in open air.

Ash turned to me.

"Stay close," he murmured, making a quick gesture with his hand. I felt the tingle of glamour as it settled over me like a cloak. "Don't talk to anyone, don't make eye contact, and don't attract any attention. With that glamour, no one will notice you, but it will break if you make a noise or catch someone's eye. Just keep your head down and follow me."

I tried. The problem was, it was difficult *not* to notice anything beyond the castle walls. The beautiful, twisted city of the Unseelie fey rose up around me, towering spires of ice and stone, houses made of petrified roots, caves with icicles dangling from the openings like teeth. I followed Ash down narrow alleys with eyes peering out from under rocks and shadows, through tunnels that sparkled with millions of tiny crystals, and down streets lined with bone-white trees that glowed with sickly luminance.

And of course, the Unseelie were out in droves tonight. The streets were lit up with will-o'-the-wisps and corpse candles, and swarms of

Winter fey danced, drank and howled at the top of their lungs, their voices echoing off the stones. I remembered the wild Revel in the courtyard, and realized the Unseelie were still celebrating the official arrival of winter.

We skirted the edges of the crowds, trying to avoid notice as the Winter fey whirled and spun around us. Music rang through the night, dark and seductive, stirring the mob into frenzies. More than once, the dancing turned into a bloodbath as some unfortunate faery vanished under a pile of shrieking revelers and was torn apart. Trembling, I kept my head down and my eyes on Ash's shoulders as we wove our way through the screaming throngs.

Ash grabbed me and pulled me into an alley, his glare warning me to be silent. A moment later, a pair of knights cantered into the crowd on huge black horses with glowing blue eyes, scattering the Winter fey like a flock of birds. The dancers snarled and hissed as they leaped aside, and a goblin screeched once as it was trampled beneath a charging horse, falling silent as a hoof cracked its skull open.

The knights yanked their mounts to a halt and faced the mob, ignoring the growls and hurled insults. They wore black leather armor with thorns bristling from the shoulders, and the faces beneath the open helms were sharp and cruel. Ash shifted beside me.

"Those are Rowan's knights," he muttered. "His elite Thornguards. They answer only to him and the queen."

"By orders of Her Majesty, Queen Mab," one knight shouted, his voice somehow rising over the cacophony of music and snarling voices, "the Winter Court has officially declared war on Oberon and the Summer Court! For the crime of killing Crown Prince Sage and the theft of the Scepter of the Seasons, all Summer fey will be hunted down and destroyed without mercy!"

The Winter fey roared, screeching and howling into the night. It was not a roar of rage, but rather one of ecstasy. I saw redcaps laughing, goblins dancing for joy, and spriggans grinning madly. My stomach heaved. They wanted blood. The Winter Court lived for violence, for the chance to rip into their ancient rivals without mercy. The knight let them howl and carry on a few moments before holding up his hand for silence.

"Also," he roared, bringing the chaos to a murmur, "be aware that Prince Ash is now considered a traitor and a fugitive! He has attacked his brother, Prince Rowan, gravely wounding him, and has fled the palace with

the half-breed daughter of Oberon. Both are considered extremely dangerous, so it would do you well to be wary."

Ash sucked in a breath. I saw relief cross his face, as well as guilt and concern. Rowan was still alive, though our escape through the city had become much more dangerous.

"If you see them, by order of Queen Mab, they are not to be harmed!" bellowed the knight. "Capture them, or report their whereabouts to any guard, and you will be greatly rewarded. Failure to do so invites the queen's wrath upon your head. Spread the word, for tomorrow we march to war!"

The knights spurred their mounts into action and galloped off, amid the roars of the Unseelie crowd. Ash looked deep in thought, his eyes narrowed to gray slits.

"Rowan isn't dead," he breathed, and I couldn't tell if he was pleased with this news or not. "At least, not yet. This will make things considerably more difficult."

"How will we get out?" I whispered.

Ash frowned. "The gates will be guarded," he muttered, looking past me into the street, "and I don't trust the regular trods if Rowan knows we're out here." He paused, thinking, then sighed. "There is one more place we can go."

"Where's that?"

He glanced at me, and I suddenly realized how close we were. Our faces were just inches apart and I felt his heartbeat quicken, matching my own. Quickly, he turned away, and I ducked my head, hiding my burning face.

"Come on," he whispered, and I thought I caught a tremor in his voice. "We're not going far, but we have to hurry. The Market keeps its own hours, and if we don't reach it in time, it will disappear."

A wild howl rang out of the darkness, and we looked back at the crowd. The Winter fey had gone back to their partying as if nothing had happened, but there was a meaner, desperate edge to their revels now, as if the promise of war had only whetted their appetite for blood. A pair of redcaps and a hag squabbled over the body of the dead goblin, and I turned away before I was sick. Ash took my hand and pulled me on, into the shadows.

* * *

WE FLED THROUGH the city, keeping to the shadows and darkness, somehow avoiding the mobs in the street. At one point, we very nearly tripped over a redcap exiting a hole in the wall. The creature snarled an insult, but then its beady eyes widened in recognition and it turned to shout a warning instead. Ash gestured sharply, and an ice dagger thunked into the creature's open mouth, silencing it forever.

We reached a circular courtyard on the banks of a huge underground lake, mist writhing off the water to drift along the ground. Colorful booths and tents stood empty as we passed through, flapping in the breeze like a dead, abandoned carnival. An enormous white tree stood in the very center, bearing fruit that looked like human heads. A narrow door was embedded in the thick trunk, and Ash quickened his pace as we approached.

"The Market is through here," he explained, pulling me behind the tree as an ogre lumbered past, its steps slow and ponderous. "Now, listen. Whatever you see in there, don't buy anything, don't offer anything, and don't accept anything, no matter how much you want it. The vendors will try to make a deal with you—ignore them. Keep silent, and keep your eyes on me. Got it?"

I nodded. Ash opened the narrow door with a creak and led me inside, shutting it behind him. The interior of the trunk glowed softly and had a putrid sweet smell, like decaying flowers. I looked around for another door or way out, but the trunk was empty except for the door we came in.

"Stay close," Ash whispered, and he pushed the door open again.

Noise exploded through the doorway. The circular courtyard now thronged with life; the booths overflowed with merchandise; music and faery fire drifted through the night, and fey milled about in huge numbers, buying, talking and haggling with the vendors. I shrank back against the trunk, and Ash gave me a reassuring smile.

"It's all right," he said, leading me forward again. "In the Market, no one questions why you're here or where you came from. The only thing they're concerned about is the deal."

"So, it's safe, then?" I asked, as a faery with a wolf's head stalked through the crowd, carrying a string of severed hands. Ash chuckled darkly.

"I wouldn't go that far."

We joined the throng who, despite the jostling, shoving and snarled insults, paid us little attention. Unearthly vendors stood beside their booths or tents, crying out their wares, beckoning to passersby with long fingers or claws. A warty goblin caught my eye and grinned, pointing to his display of necklaces made of fingers, teeth and bones. A hag waved a shrunken pig's head in my face, while a hulking troll tried handing me some kind of meat-on-a-stick. It smelled wonderful, until I noticed the crispy bird and rat heads stuck on the kebabs between other unidentifiable chunks, and hurried after Ash.

The oddities continued. Dream catchers made of spider silk and infant bones. Monkey Paws and Hands of Glory. One booth had a prominent display of still-beating hearts, while the tent beside it offered flowers of delicate spun glass. Everywhere I looked, I saw wonders, horrors, and the just plain weird. The vendors were incredibly persistent; if they caught you looking, they would leap in front of you, shouting the marvels of their wares and offering "a deal you can't refuse."

"A few locks of your hair," cried a rat-faced imp, holding out a golden apple. "Be young and beautiful forever." I shook my head and hurried on.

"A memory," crooned a doe-eyed woman, waving a glittering amulet back and forth. "One tiny memory, and your greatest wish will be answered." Yeah right. I'd done the whole memory thing before, thank you. It wasn't pleasant.

"Your firstborn child," quite a few of them wanted. "Your name. A phial of your tears. A drop of blood." With every offer, I just shook my head and hurried after Ash, weaving my way through the crowds. Sometimes, a glare from the Ice prince would cower the more persistent vendors who followed us through the aisles or latched on to my sleeve, but mostly we just kept moving.

Near the lake, a row of wooden docks floated above the ink-black water. A weathered tavern crouched at the shoreline like a bloated toad. A goblin staggered out holding a tankard, puked all over the sidewalk, and collapsed in it with his face to the sky. Ash stepped over the groaning body and ducked through the swinging doors. Wrinkling my nose at the trashed goblin, I followed.

The interior was smoky and dim. Battered wooden tables were scattered about the room, hosting a variety of unsavory-looking fey, from

the redcap gang in the corner to the single, goat-headed phouka who watched me with glowing yellow eyes.

Ash glided through the room, weaving his way to the bar, where a dwarf with a tangled black beard glared at him and spit into a glass. “You shouldn’t be here, Prince,” he growled in an undertone, wiping the tankard with a dirty rag. “Rowan’s got half the city lookin’ for you. Sooner or later, the Thornguards will show up an’ tear the place apart if they think we’re hidin’ you.”

“I’m looking for Sweetfinger,” Ash said in an equally low voice, as I pulled myself onto a bar stool. “I need to get out of Tir Na Nog, tonight. Do you know where he is?”

The dwarf shot me a sidelong glance, his thick face pulled into a scowl. “If I didn’t know you better, Prince,” he muttered, polishing the glass again, “I would accuse you of goin’ soft. Word is you’re a traitor to the Winter Court, but I don’t care about that.” He plunked the tankard down and leaned across the counter. “Just answer me this. Is she worth it?”

Ash’s face went blank and cold, like a door slamming shut. “Would this be considered payment for finding Sweetfinger?” he replied in a voice dead of emotion.

The dwarf snorted. “Yeah. Sure, whatever. But, I want a serious answer, Prince.”

Ash was still for a moment. “Yes,” he murmured, his voice so low I barely caught it. “She’s worth it.”

“You know Mab will tear you apart for this.”

“I know.”

The dwarf shook his head, giving Ash a look of pity. “You an’ your lady problems,” he sighed, putting the glass under the counter. “Worse than the satyrs, I tell you. At least *they’re* smart enough not to get attached.”

Ash’s tone was icy. “Can you find me Sweetfinger or not?”

“Yeah, I know where he is.” The dwarf scratched his nose, then flicked something away. “I’ll send someone out to find him. You and the Summer whelp can stay upstairs until he shows up.”

Ash pushed away from the counter. His face was still locked into that expressionless mask as he turned to me. “Let’s go.”

I hopped off the bar stool. “Who’s Sweetfinger?” I ventured as we made our way across the room. No one stopped us. The other patrons

either ignored us or gave us a very wide berth. Which wasn't surprising; the cold radiating from the Winter prince was palpable.

"He's a smuggler," Ash replied, motioning me up a set of stairs in the corner. "A goblin, to be specific. Instead of smuggling goods, he smuggles living creatures. He might be the only one who can get us out of the city. If we can pay his price."

Goblins. I shuddered. My own experience with goblins hadn't been pleasant. A pack of them tried to eat me once, when I first came to the Nevernever.

Upstairs, Ash led me down a creaky hallway, past several wooden doors with strange noises coming from beyond them, until we came to the last one. Inside, a tiny room greeted us, with two simple beds along opposite walls and a flickering lamp in the far corner. I noticed the lamp was actually a round cage atop a gilded stand, and the light made desperate squeaking noises as it flitted from side to side. Ash shut the door, and I heard the click of a lock before he leaned back against it, looking utterly exhausted.

I longed to hold him. I wanted to melt into him and feel his arms around me, but his last words hung between us like a barbed-wire fence. "Are you all right?" I whispered. He nodded and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Get some sleep," he murmured. "I don't know if we'll get another chance to stop after this. You should rest while you can."

"I'm not tired."

He didn't press the issue, but stood there watching me with a weary, sorrowful expression. I gazed back, wishing I could bridge the distance between us, not knowing how to reach him.

An awkward silence filled the room. Words hovered on the tip of my tongue, wanting to burst out, but I knew Ash didn't want to hear them. I teetered between silence and confession, knowing I would be spurned, still wanting to try. Ash stood quietly, his gaze wandering about the room. A couple times he, too, seemed about to say something, only to fall silent, stabbing his fingers through his hair. When words finally did come, we both spoke at the same time.

"Ash—"

"Meghan, I—"

Someone pounded on the door, making us both jump. “Prince Ash!” a squeaky voice shouted from the other side. “Are you there? Sweetfinger is downstairs, waiting for you.”

“Tell him I’m on my way,” Ash replied, and pushed himself off the door. “Wait here,” he told me. “It should be safe. Lock the door and try to get some rest.” He opened the door, revealing a leering goblin on the other side, and closed it softly behind him.

I sat down on one of the beds, which reeked of beer and dirty straw, and stared at the door for a long time.

* * *

THEN I WAS BEING shaken awake. I blinked in the darkness; someone had put a black cloth over the caged light and the room was swathed in shadow. Sleep made my eyelids heavy and awkward, but I cracked them open to focus on the blurred form above me. Ash sat on the edge of the mattress, silver eyes bright in the gloom, holding me gently by the shoulders.

“Meghan,” he murmured, “wake up. It’s time.”

Exhaustion pulled at me. I’d been more tired than I thought, and my thoughts swirled muzzily. Seeing I was awake, Ash started to rise off the bed, but I slid forward and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“No,” I murmured, my voice still groggy with sleep. “Stay.”

He shivered, and his hands came to rest over mine. “You’re not making this any easier,” he whispered into the darkness.

“Don’t care,” I slurred, tightening my hold on him. He sighed and half turned in my arms, smoothing the hair from my cheek.

“Why am I so drawn to you?” he muttered, almost to himself. “Why is it so hard to let go? I thought…at first…it was Ariella, that you remind me of so much. But it’s not.” Though he didn’t smile, his eyes lightened a shade. “You’re far more stubborn than she ever was.”

I sniffed. “That’s like the pot calling the kettle black,” I whispered, and a faint, tiny grin finally crossed his face, before his expression clouded and he lowered his head, touching his forehead to mine.

“What do you want of me, Meghan?” he asked, a low thread of anguish flickering below the surface. Tears blurred my vision, all the fear and heartache of the past few days rising to the surface.

“Just you,” I whispered. “I just want you.”

He closed his eyes. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I demanded. His face swam above me, blurring with tears, but I refused to release him to wipe my eyes. My desperation grew. “Who cares what the courts say?” I challenged. “We could meet in secret. You could come to my world, no one will see us there.”

He shook his head. “Mab already knows. Do you think she would let us get away with it? You saw how well she reacted in the throne room.” I sniffled, burying my face in his side, as his fingers gently combed my hair. I didn’t want to let him go. I wanted to curl into him and stay there forever.

“Please,” I whispered desperately, not caring about pride anymore. “Don’t do this. We can find a way around the courts. Please.” I bit my lip as a shiver went through him, and I held him tighter. “I love you, Ash.”

“Meghan.” Ash’s voice was tormented. “You don’t…know me at all. You don’t know what I’ve done…the blood on my hands, both faery and mortal.” He stopped, taking a breath to compose himself. “When Ariella died, everything inside me froze. It was only through hunting—killing—that I could feel anything again. I cared for nothing, not even myself. I threw myself into fights I thought I would lose, if only to feel the pain of a sword blow, the claws tearing me apart.”

I shivered and clung to him, remembering the scars across his back and shoulders. I could imagine him fighting, his eyes dead and cold, hoping that something would finally get lucky and kill him.

“Then you came along,” he muttered, touching my wet cheek, “and suddenly…I don’t know. It was like I was seeing things for the first time again. When I saw you with Puck, the day you came to the Nevernever…”

“The day you tried to kill us,” I reminded him.

He winced, nodding. “I thought fate was playing a cruel joke on me. That a girl, who could have been Ariella’s shadow, was keeping company with my sworn enemy—it was too much. I wanted to kill you both.” He sighed. “But, then I met you at Elysium, and…” He closed his eyes. “And everything I thought I’d lost forever came trickling back. It was maddening. I thought about killing you several times during Elysium, just to stop what I knew would be my downfall. I didn’t want this, to feel anything, especially with a half-human girl who was the daughter of the Summer King.” He snorted ruefully, shaking his head. “From the moment

you stepped into the Nevernever, you've been my undoing. I should never have agreed to that contract."

I sucked in a breath. "Why?"

He brushed a strand of hair from my cheek, his voice gentler than before. "Because no matter what I feel, I can't fight centuries of rules and traditions, and neither can you."

"We could try—"

"You don't know the courts," Ash continued softly. "You haven't been in Faery long enough to know what could happen, but I do. I've seen it, centuries of it. Even if we get the scepter back, even if we manage to stop the war, we'll still be on opposite sides. Nothing will change that, no matter how much you wish it wasn't so. No matter how much *I* wish it was different."

I didn't answer, too miserable to comment. His voice, though filled with regret, was resolved. He had made up his mind, and I wouldn't be changing it.

A strange peace settled through me, or perhaps my despair finally gave in to resignation. *So, this is it*, I thought, as numbness spread through my body, easing the sharp pain in my chest. *This is what breaking up is like.* Although, I was sure "breaking up" was the wrong expression. It seemed much too common and trivial for what was happening.

"Come on." Ash pried my hands from his waist and stood up. "We should go. Sweetfinger and I made a deal. He'll get us out of the city through the goblin tunnels that run beneath it. We'll need to hurry—Rowan's Thornguards are still scouring the streets for us."

"Ash," I said, struggling upright. "Wait. Just one more thing, before we go."

He frowned warily. "What do you want?"

I rose from the bed, my heart thudding in my chest. "Kiss me," I whispered, and saw his eyebrows arc in surprise. "Just once more," I pleaded, "and I promise it will be the last time. I'll be able to forget you after that." A bald-faced lie. Even if I turned ninety, lost my mind and forgot everything else, the memory of the Winter prince would be a shining beacon that would never fade.

He hesitated, unsure, and I tried to make my tone light. "Last time, I swear." I met his gaze and tried for a smile. "It's the least you can do. I didn't get a proper breakup, you know."

Ash still wavered, looking torn. His eyes flicked to the door, and for a moment I thought he would walk away, leaving me to shrivel into a mortified heap. But then he let out a quiet sigh, and his shoulders slumped in resignation.

Meeting my gaze, he took one step forward, drew me into his arms, and brushed his lips to mine.

I think our last kiss was meant to be quick and chaste, but after the first touch of his lips fire leaped up and roared through my belly. My fingers yanked him close, digging into his back, and his arms crushed me to him as if wanting to meld us together. I knotted my fingers in his hair and bit down on his bottom lip, making him groan. His lips parted, and my tongue swept in to dance with his. There was nothing sweet or gentle in our last kiss; it was filled with sorrow and desperation, of the bitter knowledge that we could've had something perfect, but it just wasn't meant to be.

It ended much too soon. Ash pulled away, eyes bright, shaking with desire and passion. Both our hearts were thudding wildly, and Ash's fingers were digging painfully into my shoulders. "Don't ask me this again," he rasped, and I was too breathless to answer.

He released me and stalked through the door without looking back. I took a deep breath, halting the tears crawling up my throat, and followed.

A goblin waited for us at the foot of the stairs, his mouth pulled into a toothy grin that showed missing fangs and gold teeth. He was decked out in jewelry: rings, ear studs, necklaces, even a gold nose ring. A milky glass eye sparkled as he turned to me, rubbing his claws and grinning like a gleeful shark.

"Ah, this is princess that turned prince traitor," he hissed, eyeing me up and down. "And now they need goblin tunnels out of city, good, good." He gestured with a ring-encrusted hand. "No time to speak. We leave now, before guards show up, ask too many questions. Need anything before we go, traitor prince?"

Ash looked pained, but shook his head. The goblin cackled, gold teeth flashing in the dim light. "Yes, good! Follow me, then."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ring

Sweetfinger led us out a back door of the tavern and along the edge of the lake. Past the docks, the ground dropped away sharply to a narrow coastline of jagged rock and stone. Hugging the breaker wall, we followed Sweetfinger to the water's edge, where two burlier goblins waited inside a small wooden boat.

"Quickly, quickly," Sweetfinger said, urging us inside. We took a cautious seat between the two hench-goblins, who picked up the oars as Sweetfinger shoved us into the water and leaped in. As they rowed us farther from shore, he turned to us with an apologetic smile.

"Goblin tunnels aren't far from here," he said, fingering one of his rings. "Only goblins know where they are, and only goblins are allowed to see them and live. Used to be, payment would be your lovely eyes, but times change. Point is, you not goblin, you cannot see our secret tunnels. Rules, you know. So sorry."

"Understood," Ash muttered as a goblin slid behind him and pulled a blindfold over his eyes. I jumped as a black cloth covered my eyes as well, plunging me into darkness.

We drifted for a long while, the only sounds being the rhythmic sloshing of the oars in the water and Sweetfinger's occasional comment to his thugs. Ash's body was tense against mine, muscles coiled bands under his skin. The air grew colder, and I heard the squeaking of bats somewhere above us. The boat bumped and scraped against rocks, and a foul stench crept into the air, smelling of dung and rotten meat. Snickers and cackling laughter echoed in the darkness, and clawed feet skittered over the rocks.

Then, the noises and smells faded, and we floated in silence for a time. I heard Sweetfinger and his guards muttering among themselves, and it made me very nervous. Finally, the boat bumped against solid ground, and someone pulled it ashore.

I pulled off the blindfold and blinked in the dim light. We were in a small cave with a pebbly floor, bones and trash scattered about the room. In the distance, a circle of light glimmered invitingly. I breathed a sigh of relief. We'd made it.

Sweetfinger leered at us as Ash helped me out of the boat. "As promised," he said, gesturing to the exit at the back of the room. "Safe passage out of city. Now, I believe traitor prince owes me something, yes?" He held out a jewel-encrusted claw, and Ash dropped a small leather pouch into his waiting hand.

"Tell no one you've seen us," Ash said as the two hench-goblins shoved the boat back into the water.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that, Your Highness," came a harsh, gravelly voice at the other end of the cave. We spun, Ash's hand on his sword, as four Thornguards stepped into view, their boots crunching over the stones.

"Very intelligent, not going through the regular trods, Ash," said one guard. His armor was thornier than the others', the barbs on his shoulders bristling like giant porcupine quills. "Mab has them all well guarded, but you knew that, didn't you? Unfortunately, Rowan already bribed every smuggler in the city by the time you found this one. Goblins are such disgusting opportunists, aren't they?"

Furious, I glared back at Sweetfinger, but the boat was already well out of reach, Sweetfinger grinning at me from the bow.

"Sorry, Princess," the goblin cackled. "Prince's offer was good. Other prince's offer was better. Nothing personal, yes?" He waved, and the boat drifted away into the dark. An icy stone settled in the pit of my stomach, and I turned back to the guards.

As one, the Thornguards drew their weapons. Their swords were spiky and black, with long thorns running the length of the blade, looking as sharp as razors.

"Stand down, Edgebriar," Ash commanded. He hadn't drawn his sword yet, but his posture was tense. "I don't want to fight you. You can walk away from this and Rowan would never know. We're not returning to the city."

"I'm afraid we weren't ordered to return you to the city, or Mab," Edgebriar said with the barest of smirks. "You see, Rowan knows you're going after the scepter, and he can't allow that. The new king wants the

half-breed alive, but I'm afraid we're going to have to kill you, Prince. Like Sweetfinger said, it's nothing personal."

For a second, I didn't know who he was talking about. Then it hit me like a punch in the stomach. The new king. The new *Iron King.* They were working for the Iron Kingdom. Rowan must've let Tertius and the wiremen into the palace. He let them kill Sage and take the scepter, and convinced Mab that the Iron fey were not a threat!

Ash's face went blank with shock. "No," he said, as the blood drained from his face. "No, Rowan wouldn't sell us out. Not to them. What have you done?"

"We can't stop the Iron Kingdom," Edgebriar continued, his voice earnest. "The old ways have become obsolete. Mab can't protect us any longer. It is time to ally ourselves with the stronger power, to become greater than we are. Rowan will lead us to a new era, one where we will fear nothing. Not the touch of iron, not the fading of human imagination, nothing! Let the oldbloods wallow in their ancient traditions. They will fall soon, and we will rise up to take their place."

"Rowan will destroy us," Ash said grimly. "This war only hastens our destruction. If Summer and Winter stood together, we could stop the Iron Kingdom."

"For how long?" Edgebriar demanded, punctuating his words with a savage swing of his blade. "The humans dream their technology, their grand sweeping visions, and forget us. We can't turn back the clock, but we *can* evolve to survive. I will show you what I mean." He ripped off his gauntlet, holding up his bare hand. On his third finger, an iron ring gleamed in the light. The entire digit was blackened and shriveled, and my stomach turned as he shook his fist triumphantly. "Look!" he demanded. "Look at me! I do not fear the touch of iron, of progress. It burns me now, but soon I will be able to use it freely, like the humans. Soon, I will be like them."

"You're dying, Edgebriar." Ash's voice was full of horror and pity. "It's killing you slowly, and you don't even realize it."

"No! After the war, when both sides are weak and open, the Iron fey will sweep in and destroy all traces of the old. There will be no more Summer or Winter. There will be no more courts. There will be only the Iron Kingdom, and those strong enough to stand with it."

I stared at him. “Rowan let the Iron fey into the palace, didn’t he?” I whispered, and his fevered gaze turned on me. “He sent them to steal the scepter, and he let them kill his own brother. How can you work for such a bastard? Can’t you see he’s using you?”

“Be silent, half-breed.” Edgebriar glared at me. “Insult my prince again, and I will cut out your tongue and feed it to my hounds. Rowan is the only one who cares for the future of Tir Na Nog.”

Ash shook his head. “Rowan wants power, and would sacrifice his entire court to achieve it. You don’t have to be responsible for his insanity, Edgebriar. Let us pass. We can end this war, and if Summer stands with us, we can find a way to deal with the Iron Kingdom.”

Edgebriar’s face didn’t change. “We have our orders, Prince Ash. We will be taking the half-breed with us, but I’m afraid your journey ends here. Rowan made it quite clear that he did not want you returning to Mab, for any reason.” He gestured to the knights behind him, and they began to close in. “I apologize for the location. A prince’s tomb should be a grander affair.”

I backed away, knowing the violence that was coming next. For the millionth time, I tried desperately to do *something* with my glamour; pull up a root to trip the knights, throw a glowy ball of light to distract them, anything. It was like hitting a glass wall. I *knew* my power was on the other side, but I couldn’t access it.

Ash faced the approaching knights calmly, though I could sense muscles coiling beneath his skin. “Rowan doesn’t know me as well as he thinks,” he murmured, seemingly unconcerned with the jagged blades closing in on him, “otherwise he never would’ve made such a mistake.”

Edgebriar smiled, leering at Ash from behind the trio of knights, content to let his guards engage the Winter prince. “And what mistake would that be?”

“There’s only four of you.”

His arm whipped out, sending a flurry of ice shards at the oncoming Thornguards. The knights flinched, throwing up their arms to protect their faces, and Ash lunged into their midst.

The first one didn’t stand a chance. Ash’s blade sheared through his armor, and the faery crumpled before he could even raise his sword. Where he fell, his spiky armor seemed to unravel, flaring out into thick black briars, thorns curling into the air. In seconds, the faery’s body had

turned into a giant thornbush, growing right out of the rocks. A metal band glinted on one of the branches.

The screech of blades focused me on the current battle. I couldn't see Edgebriar, but the other two Thornguards had Ash pressed into a corner and were hounding him mercilessly. Ash parried and spun, blocking their attacks, his blade a blue-white streak through the air. I glanced around and picked up a fist-sized rock from the edge of the water. Maybe I couldn't throw fireballs, but that couldn't stop me from hurling other things.

Please don't hit Ash, I thought, winding back for the throw.

The first rock thumped off the back of a knight, doing nothing, but the second struck the side of his head, making him flinch for just a moment. It was enough. Ash's blade whipped out, ripping through his chest. The knight crumpled without a sound, and brambles erupted from his armor, covering the body in a cocoon of thorns.

I gave a shout of triumph, but a dark shape filled my vision. Edgebriar stepped out of invisibility and reached for me with taloned fingers. I tried to dodge, but the Thornguard latched on to my wrist and yanked me to him, twisting my arm behind my back. As I gasped in pain, his other arm came up to circle my throat. I squirmed and kicked at him, but only jabbed myself on his spiny armor as his arm tightened and cut off my air.

An explosion of brambles signaled the end of the last knight, and Ash came striding through the hedge toward us, a cold, murderous gleam in his eye.

"Stay where you are, Prince," Edgebriar spat, and pressed a cold black dagger against my cheek. "Not another step, or I will gouge out her pretty eyes. The Iron King doesn't care if she's a bit damaged when she comes to him."

Ash stopped, lowering his blade, his eyes never leaving the knight. Edgebriar's chokehold loosened just the tiniest bit, and I sucked in a much-needed breath, trying to be calm. This close, the knight smelled of sweat and leather, and something sharper, metallic. The ring on his hand glinted against his blackened finger as he held the knife point to my face.

"Now," Edgebriar panted, locking gazes with Ash, "I want you to put down your sword and swear you will not follow us." When Ash didn't move, Edgebriar stabbed the point of the knife into my cheek, just enough to draw blood. I gasped at the sudden pain, and Ash tensed. "I won't ask

you again, Your Highness," Edgebriar growled. "You've lost this battle. Put down your sword, and promise you will not follow us."

"Edgebriar." Ash's voice was as cold as frozen steel. "Rowan has poisoned your mind, as surely as that iron is poisoning your insides. You can still walk away from this. Let me take the princess back to Arcadia, and then we can warn Mab about the Iron King and Rowan."

"It's too late." Edgebriar shook his head wildly. "They're already coming. You can't stop them, Ash. No one can." He chuckled, a note of madness coming to the surface, and tightened his stranglehold on my neck. *"All the king's army and all the king's men,"* he whispered, waving the knife in front of my eyes, *"came to Faery on the day it would end."*

All right, enough was enough. Edgebriar had lost it; he had taken a long walk off the short end. I had to do *something.* But without a weapon or glamour, what could I do?

Blood was trickling down my face, oozing a path over my skin like a giant red tear. My cheek throbbed, and pain brought everything into sharp focus. In my mind, I saw the metal ring glowing white, pulsing with energy. I felt the glamour around it, but it was different from anything I'd felt before—cold and colorless. Was this…iron glamour? Could I use it as the fey used the wilder magic of dreams and emotion? The ring shimmered, fluid and alive, eager to be worked upon. To be shaped into something new.

Tighten, I thought, and the metal band responded instantly, biting into the skin. Edgebriar jerked, looking startled, and I squeezed harder, twisting the ring so that it cut into his flesh, drawing blood. It hissed where it touched, and Edgebriar howled, jerking his arm from my neck as if burned. I twisted from his grasp and shoved him away.

Ash lunged for Edgebriar. The Thornguard saw him coming and at the last second went for his sword, too late. Ash stepped within his guard and plunged the blade through his chest, so hard that it erupted out the knight's back.

Edgebriar staggered and fell away, hitting the water with a loud splash. He stared at the blood on his chest, than gazed up at us, his eyes blank and confused. "You don't…understand," he gurgled, as Ash looked down on him sadly. "We were going to become…like them. Rowan…promised us. He promised…"

Then his eyes rolled up in his head, and thorny creepers slithered over his body, hiding him from view.

I shuddered, torn between throwing up and bursting into tears. Strange how all my time in the Winter Court still hadn't desensitized me to blood and death. I felt Ash's gaze on me, curious and wary, like a stranger's.

"What did you do to him?"

I shook my head. The strange glamour was already fading, like it had never been. My body trembled from the aftermath of shock and adrenaline. "I don't know."

Ash glanced once more at the thornbush, at the iron ring dangling from a twig, and shuddered. "Come here," he sighed, motioning me to a large rock. "Sit down. Let me see your face."

The cut wasn't deep, more of a puncture wound than a gash, though it still hurt like hell. Ash knelt and studied it, then tore a strip from his sleeve and dunked it in a nearby puddle. As he raised it to my cheek, I instinctively flinched and jerked away, grimacing. He shook his head, and a corner of his lip twitched.

"I haven't even touched it yet. Now hold still."

He lifted the rag, and our gazes met. Ash froze. I saw a dozen emotions cross his face before he took a quiet breath and very carefully pressed the cloth to my cheek.

I was tempted to close my eyes, but kept them open, watching his face. To have him here, to have him this close, was worth the pain. I studied his eyes, his lips, the tiny silver stud in his ear, almost hidden by his dark hair. I memorized those little details, searing his image into my brain, wanting to remember this moment. Though his expression was closed and businesslike after that first glance, his fingers were gentle.

"Why are you staring at me?"

His voice made me jump. "What? I'm not."

"Liar." Ash took my hand and pressed it to the cloth, holding it to my cheek. "Here. The bleeding's stopped, but keep pressure on it for a bit just to be sure." His hand lingered on mine, cool and smooth, though he wouldn't meet my eyes. "I'm sorry, Meghan."

"Why?"

"For Rowan. For all of this." He rose and walked to where Edgebriar had fallen. Now only a black thorny bush marked the place where he had died, and Ash glared at it as if it might come back to life.

“Rowan,” I heard him mutter. “What are you thinking?”

Dropping the cloth, I walked up to him. “What now?”

He was quiet a moment, brooding. The shock of discovering that his brother was responsible for betraying all of Faery was still new, like a wound that wouldn’t close. I could tell he didn’t want to believe it. “Nothing’s changed,” he said at last, his voice cold and resolved. “The scepter is still out there, and if Rowan knows where it is, he isn’t going to tell us. When this is over, Mab will decide what to do with Rowan, but the scepter comes first.”

Very lightly, I touched his arm. “I’m sorry. He’s a jerk, but I’m sorry it had to be him.”

He nodded. “Let’s get out of here.”

Four horses stood waiting at the cave entrance; faery steeds with jet-black coats, lightning-colored manes, and glowing, white-blue eyes. Their slender hooves didn’t quite touch the ground as they stamped and shifted, regarding us with eerie intelligence.

Ash helped me into one’s saddle, and the fey-horse swished its tail and rolled its eyes at me, as if sensing my unease. I gave it a warning glare.

“Don’t try anything, horse,” I muttered, and it pinned back its ears, which was not a good sign. Ash approached another mount and swung easily into the saddle, as if he’d done it a thousand times.

“Where are we going?” I asked, fumbling with the reins, which made the horse prance sideways. Dammit, I’d never get used to this. “We know Tertius stole the scepter, Rowan helped him into the palace, and they’re both working for a new Iron King.” I frowned as I thought of the implications. “Ash, do you think we’ll have to go back to the Iron Kingd __”

My horse suddenly let out a shrill whinny and half reared, nearly throwing me off. As I shrieked and grabbed its mane, the other mount tried to bolt, but Ash pulled one rein short, and the horse spun in frenzied circles until it calmed down. As our mounts quieted, still prancing and tossing their heads, we gazed around for the source of their fear. We didn’t have to look far.

Through the trees, silhouetted against the cloudy sky, a lone figure on horseback watched us atop a snowy rise. The single tree standing over it had curled its branches as far away from the figure as possible, its limbs twisted and warped, but the rider didn’t seem to care. As we stared at each

other, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds, glinting off its steel armor.

A faint metallic rustling drifted over the wind, like thousands of knives scraping together, making my blood run cold. As the Iron knight stood motionless on the hill, an enormous pack of spindly legged creatures appeared around him. Claws flashing, limbs jerking sporadically, the wire-fey crowded the hilltop like huge spiders, gleaming in the sun.

Ash went pale, and my heart contracted in horror as the knight raised a hand toward us, sending the entire pack skittering down the hill.

We ran.

The faery steeds ate up the ground as they charged through the forest, their hooves making almost no noise in the snow. The trees flew by at a terrifying speed as the horses plunged between trunks and over logs, reminding me of my first wild ride through Faery, when I had been running *away* from Ash, ironically. At least I had a saddle this time. I clung to the horse's neck, unable to do anything else, steering or otherwise. Thankfully, Ash seemed to know where he was going, and my horse followed his as we flew over the ground.

Behind us, the metallic skittering of the wire-fey echoed on the wind, never fading or falling behind.

The trees fell away, and a steep incline soared above us, jagged rocks covered in ice as smooth as glass. My stomach turned, imagining my horse slipping and rolling on top of me, but the hooves of the Winter-born faery steeds charged up the hill without hesitation. It felt like they were running up a wall, and I clung to my horse until my arms burned with liquid fire.

At the top of the rise, Ash pulled his mount to a halt, and my horse stopped as well, prancing in place. Arms shaking from the strain of keeping my seat, I straightened cautiously.

Ash was staring down the slope, eyes narrowed to slits. I followed his gaze, and my stomach lurched. The edge of the rise fell away into a dizzying vertical drop, jagged rocks jutting up like spines. I suddenly wished I knew how to steer my horse, just to move it away from the edge.

"They're coming," Ash muttered.

The wiremen fey flowed from the trees in a glittering swarm. Scuttling to the rise, they began to climb, digging their claws into the ice as they edged upward. Steel limbs flashing, they crawled up the icy slope like ants, barely slowing down.

“What are these things?” Ash whispered. He raised his arm, and the air around him sparkled as a glittering ice spear formed overhead. With a flick of his hand, he hurled it down the slope, into the ranks of oncoming fey.

The spear hit one directly in the face, punching through the wires and tearing it from the hill. It clattered down the slope, arms and legs flailing, but the other fey leaped over the body or skittered aside, and kept coming.

My horse snorted and backed away. I grabbed for its mane as Ash whirled his steed around, his face grim.

“We can’t outrun them,” he announced, and I caught the faintest hint of fear in his voice, which only made me more terrified. “They’re faster than us, and will overtake the horses long before we reach a trod. We have to make a stand.”

I looked down at the approaching swarm, and my voice squeaked with terror. “Here? Now?”

“Not here.” Ash shook his head and pointed down the other side of the slope. “There’s an abandoned fort on the edge of the wyldwood. Ariella and I used it as a hunting lodge. If we can reach it, we might have a chance.”

The other side of the slope fell away into the same break-neck drop. Far, far in the distance, I saw where the snow-covered treetops met the writhing gray mist of the wyldwood.

A raven circled us, giving a harsh cry as it passed overhead as the first of the wire-fey clawed its way to the top. Ash kicked his steed into motion, and mine followed, charging for the edge of the rise. I screamed as my horse gathered its legs underneath it and leaped into empty space.

We fell for what seemed like an eternity. When we finally hit the ground, the horses landed with barely a jolt and immediately plunged into the forest.

Behind us, the wiremen poured down the slope in a glittering flood.

My body ached and my arms burned from clinging to the horse for so long. Every bump sent a lance of pain through my side, and my breath came in short, agonizing gasps. Finally, we burst through the trees into a snow-covered clearing. In the center of the grove, a crumbling tower rose skyward in a precarious upside down *L*, as if it might collapse any moment.

“Come on!” Ash leaped off his mount, ignoring it as it raced away into the trees. My horse tried to follow, but the prince grabbed its reins, yanking it up short. I half slid, half fell out of the saddle, and I barely took a gasping breath before Ash was dragging me through the snow.

We ran for the fort, hearing the scraping of claws behind us. I didn’t dare look back. Ahead, through the great wooden doors, I saw the darkened interior of the room. Sunlight slanted through holes in the roof, spilling over a strangely luminescent floor. As we drew closer, I gasped. The ground was completely carpeted in white, bell-like flowers, which glowed softly in the dim light. They grew on the walls and even covered the ancient furniture lying around the room: a wooden table, a cupboard, a few simple cots. Everything was also covered in snow and ice, as the roof was full of holes, but I supposed that hadn’t mattered to Ash and Ariella. Freezing temperatures never bothered the Winter fey.

Ash pulled us through the opening, crushing flowers underfoot, and threw his weight against the doors. They groaned, reluctant to move. I joined him, and together, we strained at the stubborn gates. They closed slowly, creaking with age and time, and the wiremen were no more than twenty yards away when they finally banged shut. Ash threw down the bolt, then pressed both hands against it and sheathed the entire gate with ice. No sooner had he finished than the first blows rattled the wooden door, resounding through the chamber. The ice shivered and tiny cracks radiated through the surface as more blows shook the gate. It wouldn’t hold them for long.

Ash drew his sword. “Get back,” he told me as the door rattled again. More cracks shot through the ice. “Find a place to hide. There’s an alcove behind that statue against the wall—you should be able to fit.”

I shook my head frantically, seeing Sage surrounded by the hideous wire-fey, dying on the floor of the throne room. I couldn’t watch Ash be torn apart like that before my eyes. Ash glanced back at me and frowned.

“Meghan, there’s nothing you can do. Go! I’ll hold them as long as I can. Go, now!”

A great chunk fell out of the door as a curved wire claw tore it away. The hole widened, as metal talons ripped and clawed at the wood. Fear got the better of me. I ran to the crumbling statue of some forgotten hero, darting behind it as the first of the wiremen squeezed through the crack like a giant spider.

Claws flashing, it lunged at Ash, who was waiting for it. His sword arced through the air, shearing the spindly fey in half. Another skittered toward him, and he whipped his blade around to slice off a flailing arm. The wireman collapsed, twitching, in the flowers, shredding the delicate blooms like paper.

I bit my cheek, trying not to be sick. More fey poured through the opening as they tore the gate to shreds. Ash was forced back, giving ground to prevent the wiremen from flanking him. Finally, he stood against a broken pillar, his back to the stones, as the Iron faeries swarmed around him, slashing and clawing.

I heard a noise above us, and a shower of stones and ice tumbled to the ground. A metallic form suddenly crawled through a hole in the roof and crawled along the ceiling, making my blood run cold. “Ash, above you!” I yelled, as more fey slithered through the cracks. “They’re coming through the roof!”

The wiremen surrounded Ash in a chaotic blur. I could barely see him through the forest of slashing claws. Suddenly he leaped straight up, over the heads of the Iron fey, to land on the upright half of a broken pillar. His coat was in tatters, one side of his face was covered in crimson, and more blood dripped from numerous wounds to the flowers below.

The wiremen resumed their attack, crawling up the pillar or dropping from the ceiling. Fear hammered against my chest. I tried reaching for that strange, cold glamour I’d felt earlier with Edgebriar, but came up with nothing. I tried drawing in regular glamour, but hit the glass wall again. I wanted to scream. What was wrong with me? I had once taken down the Iron King; where was that power now? Ash was going to die in front of me, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.

Something big and black hurtled through the smashed door, diving toward the battle. It screeched as it slammed into a wireman, knocking it off the column, and the rest of the fey looked up, startled at this newest threat. It wheeled around to land on the pillar across from Ash—a giant black raven with emerald-green eyes. My heart leaped in my chest.

With a harsh, laughing cry, the bird disintegrated, vanishing in a swirling black cloud. A new form rose up from the explosion, shaking feathers from his fiery red hair, a wide, familiar grin spreading across his face.

“Hey, Princess,” Puck called, brushing feathers from his clothes and gazing around at the carnage. “Looks like I got here just in time.”

The wire-fey paused just a moment, blinking up at this newcomer, than scuttled forward once more. Puck drew a furry ball from his pocket, winked at me, and tossed it into the ranks of Iron fey swarming below him. It hit the ground, bounced once, and erupted into a large black boar, which charged into the fey with a maddened squeal.

Puck threw Ash a mocking smile. “You look like crap, Prince. Did you miss me?”

Ash frowned, stabbing a faery that was clawing at his feet. “What are you doing here, Goodfellow?” he asked coldly, which only caused Puck’s grin to widen.

“Rescuing the princess from the Winter Court, of course.” Puck looked down as the wire-fey piled on the squealing boar, ripping and slicing. It exploded into a pile of leaves, and they skittered back in confusion. “Though it appears I’m saving your sorry ass, as well.”

“I could’ve handled it.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Puck brandished a pair of curved daggers, the blades clear as glass. His grin turned predatory. “Well, then, shall we get on with it? Try to keep up, Your Highness.”

“Just stay out of my way.”

They leaped down from their pillars directly into the ranks of wiremen, who instantly swarmed around them. Back to back, Ash and Puck sliced into their opponents with renewed vigor, neither giving an inch now that the other was there. The mob of Iron fey thinned rapidly. Through the mass of writhing limbs, I caught glimpses of Ash’s face, taut with concentration, and Puck’s vicious smile.

Silently, the last few wiremen broke from the whirlwind of death in the middle of the floor. Without looking back, they scuttled up the walls, clawed their way through the holes in the roof and were gone.

Puck, his shirt now a tattered mess, sheathed his daggers and glanced around with a satisfied smirk. “Well, that was fun.” His gaze found me, still frozen behind the statue, and he shook his head. “Wow, icy reception here. And to think I came back from the dead for this.”

I squeezed from my hiding place, my heart pounding against my ribs, and ran to him. His arms opened, and I threw myself against his chest, hugging him fiercely. He was real. He was here, not dying in a tree

somewhere, left behind and forgotten. “I missed you,” I whispered against his neck.

He held me tighter. “I’ll always come back for you,” he murmured, sounding so unlike himself that I pulled back and looked at him. For a moment, his green eyes were intense, and I caught my breath at the emotion smoldering within. Then he smirked, and the effect was ruined.

I was suddenly aware of Ash leaning against a pillar, watching us with an unreadable expression. Blood streaked his face, splattering the white flowers beneath him, and his sword dangled limply from his grasp.

Puck followed my gaze, and his grin grew wider. “Hey, Prince,” he greeted, “word is you’re a traitor to the Winter Court. You’ve got the entire wyldwood in an uproar—they say you tried to kill Rowan after he caught you escaping with the princess. Clearly, I’ve missed a few things.”

“News travels fast,” Ash replied wearily. He started to rake a bloody hand through his hair, then thought better of it, dropping it to his side. “It’s been an interesting morning.”

“To say the least.” Puck gazed around at the bodies of the wiremen and wrinkled his nose. “What the hell are those things?”

“Iron fey,” I said. “I’ve seen them before. They were in the throne room with Tertius when he stole the scepter.”

“The Scepter of the Seasons?” Puck looked at me aghast. “Oh, man. So that’s where the war rumors are coming from. Winter really *is* going to attack Summer.” He glared at Ash. “So, we’re at war. Perfect. Shall we save time and kill each other now, or did you want to wait until later?”

“Don’t start, Goodfellow.” Ash matched Puck’s glare. “I didn’t want this. And I have no time for a fight.” He sighed, deliberately avoiding my gaze. “In fact, now that you’re here, you can do us both a favor. I want you to take Meghan back to the Summer Court.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Partings and Memories

“That’s it?” Puck asked, as I stared at Ash, unable to believe what I’d just heard. He still wasn’t looking and me, and Puck rattled on without noticing. “Take her back to Court? That’s easy. I was going to do that anyway, whether you liked it or not. Comes with the whole rescue thing, you know—”

“What are you talking about?” I yelled, making Puck jump. “The hell with going back to Summer! We need to get the scepter back from the Iron fey! It’s the only way to stop the war.”

“I’m aware of that.” Ash finally met my eyes, and his gaze was cold. “But this is Winter’s problem. Retrieving the scepter is my responsibility. I want you to return to your own court, Meghan. You’ll be safer there. You can’t help me this time. Go home.”

Hurt and betrayal stabbed me in the chest. “You were going to dump me on Oberon all along, weren’t you?” I spit at him. “You liar. I thought we were going after the scepter together.”

“I never told you that.”

Puck glanced from me to Ash and back again, looking confused. “Erm, so you’re saying you don’t want to go back home?” he asked me. I glared at him, and he shrugged. “Wow, so that totally makes the whole rescue plan a wash. You wanna throw me a bone here, Princess? I feel somewhat out of the loop.”

“We have to go after the scepter,” I told Puck, hoping he would back me on this. “Ash can’t do it by himself. We can help—”

“No, you can’t,” Ash broke in. “Not this time. You’d be no use to me, Meghan, not with your magic sealed—” He caught himself, looking guilty, and Puck’s eyes narrowed.

“Sealed?” Puck stepped forward threateningly. “You put a binding on her?”

“I didn’t.” Ash stared him down, defiant. “Mab did. When she first came to Winter. Mab was afraid her power would be too great, so she sealed her magic to protect the Court.”

I remembered the wall I kept hitting whenever I tried using more than the simplest glamour, and my temper flared. How dare she! “And you knew,” I accused Ash. “You knew about the seal, and you didn’t bother telling me?”

Ash shrugged, unrepentant. “Mab ordered us not to. Besides, what difference would it make? I can’t do anything about it.”

I turned to Puck, who glowered at the prince as though he might attack him right then. “Can you break it?”

Puck shook his head. “Sorry, Princess. Only Mab, or someone of equal power, can remove a binding once it’s been placed. That makes your choices Oberon, or Mab herself.”

“All the more reason that you should return to Summer.” Ash pushed himself off the pillar, wincing. Behind him, the column was smeared with red.

“Where are you going?” I asked, suddenly afraid that he would walk out that door and not return.

He sheathed his sword without looking at me. “There’s a spring a few yards behind this tower,” he replied, walking slowly toward the door. I sensed he was trying hard not to limp. “Unless either of you object, I’m going to bathe.”

“But you’re coming back, right?”

He sighed. “I’m not going anywhere tonight,” he promised, and swept a hand toward a far wall. “There’s a trunk with blankets and supplies in that corner. Make yourselves comfortable. I think we’re all going to be spending the night here.”

The trunk held several quilts, a few canteens, a quiver of arrows, and a bottle of dark wine I didn’t recognize and immediately left alone. Puck went hunting for firewood and came back with an armful, plus a branch bearing strange blue fruits he swore were safe to eat. Together, we cleared away flowers to make the campfire, though I felt a stab of guilt every time I yanked one up. They were quite beautiful, the petals so thin and delicate they were almost transparent.

“You’re awfully quiet, Princess,” Puck said as he arranged the firewood into a tepee. His slanted green eyes shot me a knowing look. “In

fact, you haven't said a word since his royal iciness left. What's wrong?"

"Oh." I cast about for an excuse. No way was I telling Puck about my feelings for Ash. He'd probably challenge him to a duel the moment he walked through the door. "I…um…I'm just weirded out, you know, with all those wiremen bodies around. It's kinda creepy, like they might come to life and attack us while we're sleeping."

He rolled his eyes. "You and your zombie obsession. I've never understood your fascination with horror movies, especially when they freak you out so much."

"They don't freak me out," I said, grateful for the change of subject.

"Riiiight, you just sleep with your light on to scare away roaches."

His comment made me smile. Not because he was right, but because it reminded me of another time, a simpler time, when all I had to worry about was homework and school and keeping up with the latest movie trends. When Robbie Goodfell and I could sit on the couch with a huge tub of popcorn and watch a marathon of *Friday the 13th* movies until the sun came up.

I wondered how much I'd missed in the time I'd been gone.

When I didn't answer, Puck snorted and shook his head. "Fine. Watch this." And he made a quick gesture with his hand. The air shimmered, and the twisted corpses lying around the room turned into piles of branches. "Better?"

I nodded, though I knew it was only an illusion. The dead fey were still there, beneath the faery glamour. Out of sight, out of mind didn't quite work for me, but at least it kept Puck from asking too many hard questions.

For a little while, anyway. "So, Princess," he began, once a cheerful fire crackled in the center of the room. I didn't know how he'd started it, but I'd learned not to question such things, in case it turned out to be an illusion and I only *thought* I was getting warm. "It seems I've missed a lot since I've been gone. Tell me everything."

I gulped. "Everything?"

"Sure!" He sat down on a quilt, leaning back comfortably. "Like, did you find Machina? Did you ever get your brother back?"

"Oh." I relaxed a bit and sat down beside him. "Yeah. Ethan is safe. He's home, and that stupid changeling is gone for good."

"What about Machina?"

I bit my lip. “He’s dead.”

Puck must’ve noticed the change in my voice, for he sat up and put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. I leaned into him, feeling his warmth, taking comfort in his nearness. “I’m sick of this place,” I whispered, feeling like a little kid, as my eyes burned and the world went fuzzy. “I want to go home.”

Puck was silent for a moment, just holding me as I leaned against him, fighting back tears. “You know,” he said finally, “I don’t have to take you back to the Summer Court. If you want, I can take you back to your world. If you really want to go home.”

“Would Oberon let me go?”

“I don’t see why not. Your magic has been sealed off. You’d be like an ordinary high school student again. Mab wouldn’t consider you a threat anymore, so the Unseelie would probably leave you alone.”

My heart leaped. Home. Could I really go home? Back to Mom and Luke and Ethan, back to school and summer jobs and a normal life? I missed that, more than I realized. I felt a bit guilty for ditching the plan to get the scepter back, but screw it. Ash didn’t want me around. My contract with him was over, and I’d paid my dues to the Unseelie Court. Our deal said nothing about me *staying* in Winter.

“What about you?” I asked, looking up at Puck. “Weren’t you ordered to bring me back to Summer? Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Oh, I’m in hot water already.” Puck grinned cheerfully. “I wasn’t even supposed to let you go after the Iron King, remember? Oberon will skin me alive for that one, so I really can’t dig myself any deeper.”

His tone was light, but I closed my eyes, guilt tearing at me. It seemed everyone I cared about was getting hurt, risking so much, just to protect me. I was tired of it; I wished I had my magic back, so that I could protect them in return.

“Why?” I whispered. “Why do you hang around? You and Ash could’ve died today.”

Puck’s heartbeat sped up under my fingers. His voice, when it came, was very soft, almost a whisper. “I would’ve thought you’d’ve figured that out by now.”

I looked up and found our faces inches apart. Twilight had deepened the room to shadow, though the carpet of flowers glowed brighter than ever. Firelight danced within Puck’s eyes as we stared at each other.

Though he still wore a tiny, lopsided smile, there was no mistaking the emotion on his face.

I stopped breathing. A tiny part of me, somewhere deep inside, was rejoicing at this newest revelation, though I think, deep down, I'd always suspected. *Puck loves me*, it whispered, thrilled. *He's in love with me. I knew it. I knew it all along.*

"You're kind of blind, you know?" Puck whispered, smiling to soften his words. "I wouldn't defy Oberon for just anyone. But, for you…" He leaned forward, touching his forehead to mine. "I'd come back from the dead for you."

My heart pounded. That tiny part of me wanted this. Puck had always been there: safe, reliable, protective. He was part of *my* Court, so there was no stupid law to get in the way. Ash was gone; he had already made up his mind. Why not try with Puck?

Puck moved closer, his lips hovering an inch from mine. And all I could see was Ash, the passion on his face, the look in his eyes when he kissed me. Guilt gnawed my insides. *No,* my mind whispered, as Puck's breath caressed my cheek. *I can't right now. I'm sorry, Puck.*

I drew back slightly, ready to apologize, to tell him I couldn't right now, when a shadow appeared in the doorway and Ash walked in.

He froze, silhouetted against the night sky, the flowers casting his features in a pale glow. His hair was slightly damp, and his clothes were mended, whether through glamour or something else I couldn't tell. For a moment, shock and hurt lay open on his face, and his hands fisted at his side. Then, his expression closed, his eyes turning blank and stony.

Puck blinked at my expression and turned as Ash walked in. "Oh, hey, Prince," he drawled, completely unconcerned. "I forgot you were here. Sorry 'bout that." I tried meeting Ash's gaze, to show him this wasn't what he thought, but he was studiously ignoring me.

"I want you gone by morning," Ash said in cold, clipped tones, sweeping around the campfire. "I want you out of my territory, you and the princess both. According to the law, I could kill you where you stand for trespassing. If I see either of you in Tir Na Nog again, I won't be so lenient."

"Jeez, don't get your panties in a twist, Your Highness." Puck sniffed. "We'll be happy to leave, right, Princess?"

I finally caught Ash's gaze, and my heart sank. He stared at me coldly, no traces of warmth or friendliness on his face. "Yeah," I whispered, my throat closing up. This was it, the last straw. I'd been in Faery long enough. It was time to go home.

Ash began moving the piles of branches, really the dead Iron fey, and dumping them outside. He worked quickly and silently, not looking at either of us, almost feverish in his desire to get them out. When the bodies were cleared away, he grabbed the bottle of wine from the trunk and retired to a far corner, brooding into the glass. His entire posture screamed *leave me the hell alone,* and even though I wanted to go to him, I kept my distance. Thankfully, Puck didn't try to kiss me again, but he was never far, giving me secret little smiles, letting me know he was still interested. I didn't know what to do. My mind was spinning, unable to settle on one thought. Later that evening, Ash stood abruptly and left, announcing he was going to "scout around" for more Iron fey. Watching him stalk out the door without a backward glance, I was torn between running after him and sobbing on Puck's shoulder. Instead, I pleaded exhaustion and climbed into one of the cots, pulling the blanket over my head so I wouldn't have to face either of them.

* * *

IT WAS HARD to sleep that night. Huddled beneath the quilts, I listened to the sound of Puck snoring and fought back tears.

I didn't know why I was so miserable. Tomorrow, I was going home, at last. I could see Mom and Luke and Ethan again; I missed them all so much, even Luke. Though I had no idea how much time had passed in the real world, just the thought of returning home should've filled me with relief. Even if Mom and Luke were old and gray, and my four-year-old kid brother was older than I was, even if it *had* been a hundred years, and everyone I knew was…

I gasped and veered my thoughts from that path, refusing to think about it. Home would be the same as it always was. I could finally go back to school, learn to drive, maybe even go to prom this year. *Maybe Puck can take me.* The thought was so ridiculous I almost laughed out loud, choking on unshed tears. No matter how much I wanted a normal life, there would be a part of me that longed for this world, for the magic and

wonder of it. It had seeped into my soul and shown me things I'd never thought existed. I couldn't be normal and ignorant ever again, knowing what was out there. Faery was a part of me now. As long as I lived, I would always be watching for hidden doors and figures from the corner of my eyes. And for a certain dark prince who could never be mine.

I must've fallen asleep, for the next thing I knew, I was opening my eyes and the room was bathed in hazy starlight. The flowers had opened completely and were glowing as if tiny moons nestled between the petals, throwing back the darkness. Ethereal moths and ghostly butterflies flitted over the carpet, delicate wings reflecting the light as they floated between blooms. Careful not to wake Puck, I rose and wandered into the flowers, breathing in the heady scent, marveling as a feathery blue moth landed on my thumb, weighing nothing at all. I breathed out, and it fluttered off toward a dark figure in the center of the carpet.

Ash stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by glowing white flowers, eyes closed as tiny lights swirled around him. They shimmered and drew together, merging into a luminescent faery with long silver hair, her features so lovely and perfect that my throat ached. Ash opened his eyes as she reached for him, her hands stopping just shy of his face. Longing shone from his eyes, and I shivered as the spectral faery moved right through him, dissolving into tiny lights.

"Is that…Ariella?" I whispered, walking up behind him.

Ash whirled around, his eyes widening at the sudden interruption. Seeing me, several emotions crossed his face—shock, anger, shame—before he sighed in resignation and turned away.

"No," he murmured, as the ghostly faery appeared again, dancing among the flowers. "It isn't. Not in the way you think."

"Her ghost?"

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving the specter as she swayed and twirled over the glowing carpet, butterflies drifting around her. "Not even that. There is no afterlife for us. We have no souls with which to haunt the world. This is…just a memory." He sighed, and his voice went very soft. "She was always happy here. The flowers…remember."

I suddenly understood. This was Ash's memory of Ariella, perfect, happy and full of life, a yearning so great it was given form, if only for a moment. Ariella wasn't here. This was only a dream, an echo of a being long departed.

Tears filled my eyes and ran down my face. The gash on my cheek stung where they passed, but I didn't care. All I could see was Ash's pain, his loneliness, his yearning for someone who wasn't me. It was tearing me apart, and I couldn't say anything. Because I knew, somehow, that Ash was saying goodbye, to both of us.

We stood in silence for a while, watching Ariella's memory dance among the flowers, her gossamer hair floating on the breeze as bright motes swirled around her. I wondered if she really was that perfect, or if this was what Ash remembered her to be.

"I'm leaving," Ash said quietly, as I knew he would. He finally turned to face me, solemn, beautiful, and as distant as the stars. "Have Goodfellow take you home. It isn't safe here any longer."

My throat felt tight; my eyes burned, and I took a shaky breath to free my voice. And even though I already knew the answer, even though my head was telling me to shut up, I whispered, "I won't see you again, will I?"

He shook his head, once. "I wasn't fair to you," he murmured. "I knew the laws, better than anyone. I knew it would end…like this. I ignored my better judgment, and for that, I'm sorry." His voice didn't change. It was still calm and polite, but I felt an icy hand squeeze my heart as he continued. "But, after tonight, we'll be enemies. Your father and my queen will be at war. If I see you again, I might kill you." His eyes narrowed, and his voice turned cold. "For real this time, Meghan."

He half turned, as if to leave. The glow of the flowers made a halo of light around him, only accenting his unearthly beauty. In the distance, Ariella danced and twirled, free from sorrow and pain and the trials of the living. "Go home, Princess," murmured the Unseelie prince. "Go home, and forget. You don't belong here."

I couldn't remember much of the night afterward, though I think it involved a lot of sobbing into my quilt. In the morning, I woke up to snow drifting in through the roof, coating the floor with heavy white powder. The flowers had faded, and Ash was already gone.

PART TWO

CHAPTER NINE

The Summoning

The evening following Ash's departure, Puck and I hit the edge of the wyldwood.

"Not far now, Princess," Puck said, giving me an encouraging grin. A few yards from where we stood, the snow and ice just…stopped. Beyond it, the wyldwood stretched before us, dark, tangled, trapped in perpetual twilight. "Just gotta cross the wyldwood to get you home. You'll be back to your old boring life before you can say 'summer school.'"

I tried smiling back, but couldn't manage it. Even though my heart soared at the thought of home and family and even summer school, I felt I was leaving a part of me behind. Throughout our hike, I'd kept turning around, hoping to see Ash's dark form striding through the snow after us, gruffly embarrassed and taciturn, but there. It didn't happen. Tir Na Nog remained eerily empty and quiet as Puck and I continued our journey alone. And as the sun sank lower in the sky and the shadows lengthened around us, I slowly came to realize that Ash wasn't coming back. He was truly gone.

I quivered on the verge of tears but held them back. I did not want to have to explain to Puck why I was crying. He already knew I was upset, and kept trying to distract me with jokes and a constant string of questions. What happened after we left him to confront Machina? How did we find the Iron Realm? What was it like? I answered as best I could, leaving out the parts between me and Ash, of course. Puck didn't need yet another reason to hate the Winter prince, and hopefully he would never find out.

As we approached the colorless murk of the wyldwood, something moved in the shadows to our left. Puck spun with blinding speed, whipping out his dagger, as a spindly form stumbled through the trees and collapsed

a few feet away. It was a girl, slender and graceful, with moss-green skin and hair like withered vines. A dryad.

The tree woman shuddered and gasped, clawing herself upright. One long-fingered hand clutched her throat as if she were being strangled. "Help…me," she gasped at Puck, her brown eyes wide with terror. "My tree…"

"What's happened to it?" Puck said, and caught her as she fell. She sagged against him, her head lolling back on her shoulders. "Hey," he said, shaking her a little. "Stay with me now. Where's your tree? Did someone cut it down?"

The dryad gasped for air. "P-poisoned," she whispered, before her eyes rolled up and her body turned to wood in his arms. With the sound of snapping twigs, the dryad curled in on herself until she resembled little more than a bundle of dry branches. I watched the faery's life fade away, remembered what Ash had said about the fey and death, and felt terribly, terribly sad. That was it for her, then. She'd simply ceased to exist.

Puck sighed, bowing his head, and gathered the lifeless dryad into his arms. She was thin and brittle now, fragile as spun glass, but not one twig snapped or broke off as he carried her away. With utmost care, he laid the body at the foot of a giant tree, murmured a few words and stepped back.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, huge roots unfurled from the ground, wrapping around the dryad to draw her down into the earth. In seconds, she had disappeared.

We stood quietly for a moment, unwilling to break the somber mood. "What did she mean by poisoned?" I finally murmured.

Puck shook himself, giving me a humorless grin. "Let's find out."

* * *

WE DIDN'T HAVE to search far. Only a few minutes into the wyldwood, the trees curled away, and we stumbled onto a familiar patch of dead ground in the middle of the forest. An entire swath of forest was sickened and dying, trees twisted into strange metal parodies. Metal lampposts grew out of the ground, bent over and flickering erratically. Wires crawled over roots and trunks, choking trees and vegetation like red and black creeper vines. The air smelled of copper and decay.

“It’s spreading,” Puck muttered, holding his sleeve to his face as the metallic breeze ruffled my hair and clothes. “This wasn’t here a few months ago.” He turned to me. “I thought you said you killed the Iron King.”

“I did. I mean, yes, he’s dead.” I gazed out over the poisoned forest, shuddering. “But that doesn’t mean the Iron Realm is gone. Tertius told me he served a new Iron King.”

Puck’s eyes narrowed. “*Another* one? You sort of failed to mention that before, Princess.” Shaking his head, he scanned the wasted area and sighed. “Another Iron King. Dammit, how many of them are we going to have to kill? Are they going to keep popping up like rats?”

I squirmed at the thought of yet another killing. A sharp wind hissed over the wasteland, scraping the branches of the metal trees, making me shiver. Puck coughed and staggered away.

“Well, come on, Princess. We can’t do anything about it now. Let’s get you home.”

Home. I thought about my family, about my normal life, so tantalizingly close. I thought of the Nevernever, dying and fading away bit by bit. And I made my decision. “No.”

Puck blinked and looked back. “What?”

“I can’t go home yet, Puck.” I gazed around at the poisoned Nevernever, seeing echoes of Machina’s realm looming over everything. “Look at this. People are dying. I can’t close my eyes and pretend it isn’t happening.”

“Why not?” I blinked at him, stunned by his cavalier attitude. He just grinned. “You’ve done enough, Princess. I think you deserve to go home after everything you went through. Hell, you already took care of one Iron King. The Nevernever will be fine, trust me.”

“What about the scepter?” I persisted. “And the war? Oberon should know Mab is planning to attack him.”

Puck shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “I was already planning on telling him, Princess, provided he doesn’t turn me into a rat as soon as he sees me. As for the scepter, the Ice prince is already looking for it. Not a lot we can do, there.” At my protest, he waved a hand airily. “The war is going to start with or without us, Princess. It’s nothing new. Winter and Summer have always been at odds. Not a century goes by that there isn’t

some kind of fighting going on. This will pass, like it always does. Somehow, the scepter will be returned, and things will go back to normal."

I frowned, remembering something Mab had said to Oberon at the ceremony. "What about my world?" I demanded. "Mab said there would be a catastrophe if Summer held the scepter longer than it was supposed to. What will happen if the Iron King gets it? Things will get really screwed up, right?"

Puck scratched the back of his neck. "Erm…maybe."

"Maybe, like how?"

"Ever wanted to go sledding in the Mojave Desert?"

I stared at him. "We can't let that happen, Puck! What's wrong with you? I can't believe you'd think I'd just ignore this!" He shrugged, still infuriatingly nonchalant, and I went for the cheap shot. "You're just afraid, aren't you? You're scared of the Iron fey and you don't want to get involved. I didn't think you'd be such a coward."

"I'm trying to keep you safe!" Puck exploded, whirling on me. His eyes glowed feverishly, and I shrank back. "This isn't a game, Meghan! The shit is about to hit the fan, and you're right in the middle of it without knowing enough to duck!"

Righteous indignation flared; I was sick of being told what to do, that I should be afraid. "I'm not helpless, Puck!" I shot back. "I'm not some squealing cheerleader you have to babysit. I've got blood on my hands now, too. I killed the Iron King, and I still have nightmares about it. I *killed* something! And I'd do it again, if I had to!"

"I know that," Puck snapped, throwing up his hands. "I know you'd risk everything to protect us, and that's what worries me. You still don't know enough about this world to be properly terrified. Things are going to get screwed eight ways from Sunday, and you're making goo-goo eyes at the enemy! I heard what happened in Machina's realm and yes, it scared the hell out of me. I love you, dammit. I'm not going to watch you get torn apart when everything goes bad."

My stomach twisted, both from his confession, and what he'd said about me and Ash. "You…you knew?" I stammered.

He gave me a scornful look. "I've been around a long time, Princess. Give me a little credit. Even a blind man would see the way you looked at him. I'm guessing something happened in Machina's realm, but once you came out, our boy remembered he wasn't supposed to fall in love with

Summer." I blushed, and Puck shook his head. "I didn't say anything because he'd already made up his mind to leave. You might not know the consequences, Princess, but Ash does. He did the right thing, much as I hate to speak well of him."

My lip trembled. Puck snorted, but saw me teetering on the brink of tears. His expression softened. "Forget about him, Meghan," he said gently. "Ash is bad news. Even if the law wasn't an issue, I've fought him enough times to know he would break your heart."

The tears finally spilled over. "I can't," I whispered, giving in to the despair that had followed me all morning. This wasn't fair to Puck, after he'd finally confessed that he loved me, but I couldn't seem to stop. My soul cried out for Ash, for his courage and determination; for the way his eyes thawed when he looked at me, as if I were the only person in the world; for that beautiful, wounded spirit I saw beneath the cold exterior he showed the world. "I can't forget. I miss him. I know he's the enemy, and we broke all kinds of rules, but I don't care. I miss him so much, Puck."

Puck sighed, either in sympathy or aggravation, and pulled me close. I sobbed into his chest, releasing all the pent-up emotions that had been building since I first saw Ash in the throne room. Puck held me and stroked my hair like old times, saying nothing, until the tears finally slowed and I sniffled against his shirt.

"Better?" he murmured.

I nodded and broke away, wiping my eyes. The ache was still there, but it was bearable now. I knew it would be a long time before the hurt went away, if ever, but I knew in my heart that I had said my last goodbyes to Ash. Now, maybe I could let him go.

Puck moved behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, leaning close. "I know it's too soon right now," he muttered into my hair, "but, just so you know, I'll wait. When you're ready, I'll be right here. Don't forget, Princess."

I could only nod. Puck squeezed my shoulders and stepped back, waiting quietly while I composed myself. When I turned around again, he was back to being normal Puck, perpetual grin plastered to his face, leaning against a tree.

"Well," he sighed, "I don't suppose I'll be changing that stubborn mind of yours, will I?"

"No, you won't."

“I was afraid of that.” He leaped onto an old stump, crossing his arms and cocking his head. “Well then, my scheming princess, what’s the plan?”

I wanted to smile at him, but something was wrong. My legs felt all tingly, and a strange pull tugged at my stomach. I felt restless, like ants crawled beneath my skin, and I couldn’t hold still if my life depended on it. Without meaning to, I began edging away from Puck, toward the forest.

“Princess?” Puck hopped down, frowning. “You all right? Got ants in your pants or something?”

I had just opened my mouth to reply when some invisible force nearly yanked me off my feet, and I shrieked instead. Puck reached for me, but I leaped away without meaning to. “What is this?” I cried, as the strange force yanked on me again, urging me into the trees. “I can’t…stop. What’s going on?”

Puck grabbed my arm, holding me back, and my stomach felt like it was being pulled in two. I screamed, and Puck let go, his face white with shock.

“It’s a Summoning,” he said, hurrying after me as I walked away. “Something is calling you. Did you make a bargain or give anything personal away recently? Hair? Blood? A piece of clothing?”

“No!” I cried, grabbing a vine to stop myself. Pain shot up my arms, and I let go with a yelp. “I haven’t given anything away! How do I stop it?”

“You can’t.” Puck jogged at my side, his gaze intense and worried, but he made no move to touch me. “If something is Calling, you have to go. It only gets more painful if you resist. Don’t worry, though.” He attempted a cheerful grin. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Don’t worry?” I tried to scowl at him over my shoulder. “This is like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers;* of course I’m worried!” Once more, I tried latching on to a tree to stop my feet from waltzing away without my say-so. No use. My arms wouldn’t even obey me anymore. With a final glance at Puck, I gave in to the strange compulsion and let my body take me away.

I strode through the forest like I was on a mission, ignoring all but the greatest obstacles. I scrambled over rocks and fallen trees, charged headlong down gullies, and walked through brambles and briar patches, gasping as they tore at my skin and clothes. Puck followed close behind, his worried gaze at my back, but he didn’t stop me a second time. My legs

burned, my breath came in short gasps, and my arms bled from dozens of cuts and scratches, but I could no sooner make myself stop than fly. And so we continued our mad rush through the forest, getting farther away from Tir Na Nog and deeper into unknown territory.

Night was falling when the weird spell faded at last, and my feet stopped so abruptly that I fell, pitching forward and rolling in the dirt. Puck was beside me instantly, helping me up, asking whether I was okay. I couldn't answer him at first. My legs burned, and all I could do was suck air into my starving lungs and feel relieved that my body was finally my own again.

"Where are we?" I gasped as soon as I was able.

It seemed we had stumbled onto some sort of village. Simple mud and thatch huts lay in a loose semicircle around a fire pit, which was empty and cold. Bones, animal skins, and half-eaten carcasses lay scattered about, buzzing with flies.

"Looks like an abandoned goblin village," Puck muttered as I leaned against him, still gasping. He looked down at me, smirking. "Piss off any goblins lately, Princess?"

"What? No." I wiped sweat from my eyes and stumbled over to a log, collapsing on it with a groan. "At least, I don't think so."

"There you are," came a disembodied voice, from somewhere near the edge of the trees. I jumped up and looked around, but couldn't see the speaker. "You are late. I was afraid you had gotten lost, or eaten. But, I suppose it is only human failing that is to blame for the loss of punctuality."

My heart leaped. I knew that voice! I gazed around eagerly, but of course I couldn't see anything until Puck grabbed my arm and pointed me toward the edge of the trees. An old log lay in the shadows just outside the village border, dappled by moonlight. One moment, it was empty. Then, I blinked, or the moonlight shifted, and a large gray cat sat there, bottlebrush tail curled around his legs, regarding me with lazy golden eyes.

"Grimalkin!"

Grimalkin blinked at me, looking much as he always did, long gray fur blending perfectly into the moonlight and shadows. He ignored me as I rushed up, completely absorbed in washing his front paw. I might have

swooped him up and given him a squeeze, if I didn't know his sharp claws would turn my face into hamburger and he would never forgive me.

Puck grinned. "Hey, cat," he greeted with an airy wave. "Long time no see. I guess you're the one responsible for our little Death March?"

The feline yawned. "That is the last time I put a Summoning on a human," he mused, raising a hind leg to scratch his ear. "I could have taken a nap instead of waiting for you to finally show up. What took you so long, human? Did you *walk?*"

I finally remembered: Grimalkin had helped me in the search for my brother, and in return, we had agreed that he could call on me, once, at a time of his choosing, though I'd had no idea what that entailed at the time. That was our bargain. Seems he'd finally gotten around to calling it in.

"What are you doing here, Grim?" I asked, torn between delight and aggravation. I was happy to see him, of course, but I wasn't thrilled about the forced march through goblin-infested woodlands, just to say hi. "This better be good, cat. Your stupid Summoning spell could've killed me. What is it you want?"

Grimalkin turned to groom his hindquarters. "*I* do not want anything from you, human," he said between licks. "I brought you here as a favor for someone else. You will have to take your business up with him. And, if you would, remind him that he now owes me a boon, since I wasted a perfectly good Summoning on you."

"What are you talking about?"

"HE MEANS ME, MEGHAN CHASE." The thunderous voice shook the ground, and the smell of burning coal drifted over the breeze. "I ASKED HIM TO CALL YOU HERE."

Something stepped out from behind a hut, a monstrous horse of blackened iron, with burning red eyes and flames smoldering through the chinks in its belly. Steam billowed from its nostrils as it swung to face me, huge and imposing and terrifyingly familiar.

Ironhorse.

CHAPTER TEN

Truth and Lies

"STOP!" Ironhorse bellowed as Puck immediately pulled out his dagger, shoving me behind him. "I DID NOT COME HERE TO FIGHT, ROBIN GOODFELLOW. PUT YOUR WEAPON DOWN AND LISTEN TO ME."

"Oh, I don't think so, Rusty," Puck sneered, as we began backing toward the edge of the village. "I have a better idea. You stay there until we get to Oberon, who will rip you apart and bury your pieces so far apart you'll never get put back together."

My heart pounded, both from fear and a sudden fury. Ironhorse was one of Machina's lieutenants, sent to capture me and bring me to the Iron King. We'd escaped him twice before, once in Tir Na Nog and once in the Iron Kingdom, but Ironhorse had a bad habit of popping up when we least expected it. I certainly hadn't expected to run into him *here*.

"Dammit, Grim!" I raged, shooting the cat a furious glare as we backed up. He blinked at me calmly. "You sold us out to *them?* That's low, even for you."

Grimalkin sighed and gave Ironhorse a chiding look. "I thought you were to stay hidden until I could explain things," he said with an exasperated flick of his tail. "I told you they would overreact."

Ironhorse stamped a hoof, sending an explosion of dirt into the air. "TIME IS PRESSING," he boomed, tossing his head. "WE DO NOT HAVE THE LUXURY OF WAITING MUCH LONGER. MEGHAN CHASE, I MUST SPEAK WITH YOU. WILL YOU HEAR ME OUT?"

I hesitated. This was new. Normally, about this time, we'd be fighting for our lives. Ironhorse wasn't usually polite. And Grimalkin still watched calmly from the log, gauging our reaction. Curiosity got the better of me. I put a hand on Puck's arm to stop him from backing up farther.

"I want to talk to him," I whispered, ignoring his frown. "He came here for a reason, and maybe he knows about the scepter. Keep an eye on him,

will you?”

Puck glared at me, then shrugged. “Fine, Princess. But the second he makes a move, he’ll be upside down in a tree before he can blink.”

I squeezed his arm and stepped around him to face Ironhorse. The huge Iron fey loomed over me, steam writhing from his mouth and nostrils. “What do you want?”

I’d forgotten how *big* Ironhorse was. Not just tall, but massive. He shifted his weight, gears clanking and groaning, and I took a wary step back. He might not be attacking, but I trusted him about as far as I could throw him, which was not at all. I also hadn’t forgiven him for nearly killing Ash the last time we’d met.

Ironhorse lowered his head in what was almost a bow. “THANK YOU, MEGHAN CHASE. I CALLED YOU HERE BECAUSE WE HAVE A MUTUAL PROBLEM. YOU SEEK THE SCEPTER OF THE SEASONS, IS THAT NOT CORRECT?”

I crossed my arms. “What do you know about that?”

“I KNOW WHERE IT IS,” Ironhorse continued, swishing his tail with a clanking sound. “I CAN HELP YOU RETRIEVE IT.”

Puck laughed. “Sure you can,” he mocked, as Ironhorse snorted and pinned his ears. “And all we have to do is follow you like eager little puppy dogs, all the way into the trap. Sorry, tin can, we’re not that naive.”

Ironhorse snorted. “DO NOT MOCK ME, ROBIN GOODFELLOW,” he said with a blast of flame from his nostrils. “MY OFFER IS GENUINE. I DO NOT SEEK TO MISLEAD YOU.”

“Bull,” I snapped, crossing my arms. Ironhorse blinked at me, astonished. “Tertius and a bunch of creepy metal assassins stole the scepter and killed Sage, knowing Mab would blame Oberon for it. The new Iron King designed this war. He plans to slaughter everyone when the courts are at their weakest. Why would you want to help us stop it?”

“BECAUSE—” Ironhorse stamped a hoof. “—THE NEW IRON KING IS A FRAUD.”

It was my turn to blink at him. “A fraud? What do you mean?”

The lieutenant tossed his head disdainfully. “EXACTLY WHAT I SAID. THE KING CURRENTLY SITTING THE THRONE IS AN INTRUDER AND A FAKE. I FEEL NO LOYALTY TOWARD HIM.” He swished his tail and raised his head imperiously. “I AM NOT LIKE THE IRON BROTHERHOOD. THE KNIGHTS WERE CREATED TO OBEY

WHOEVER SITS UPON THE THRONE. THEIR SENSE OF DUTY IS WARPED. I KNOW THE TRUTH. AND I WILL NOT SERVE HIM."

I glanced at Puck. "What do you think of all this?"

"Me?" Puck smirked and crossed his arms. "I think all Iron fey should be melted down into scrap metal. I wouldn't follow Rusty here if my life depended on it."

"How very predictable." Grimalkin's voice drifted up from near my feet. I hadn't even heard him move. "Your prejudice blinds you to what is really happening."

"Oh, really?" I glared at him. "Then why don't you tell us what's going on, Grim."

Grimalkin yawned. "Is it not obvious? When you killed Machina, the Iron fey lost their ruler. They needed someone to sit upon the throne, give them direction. A false monarch claiming to be the Iron King answered them, but not everyone accepted him. Now, the Iron fey are split into two camps, one siding with the false king, and one that wishes to bring him down. Ironhorse is part of the second. Is that not true?"

"THAT IS CORRECT."

"If the false king gets the scepter, he will become even more powerful," Grimalkin continued, gazing at me with unblinking golden eyes. "If he is to be stopped, it must happen before he receives it. Ironhorse claims to know its location. You would be foolish not to listen to him."

"What if he's lying?"

Ironhorse threw up his head with an indignant blast of flame. "I DO NOT LIE," he boomed, and I shrank back from the heat. "DESPITE WHAT YOU THINK OF ME, I AM STILL FEY, AND NO FEY CAN TELL AN UNTRUTH."

Blinking, I looked at Puck. I hadn't heard that before, except in vague mentions of faery lore. "Really?"

Puck nodded. "Pretty much, Princess." He shot an evil look at Ironhorse. "Though comparing Rusty to one of us is a bit of a stretch."

"But…you told lies all the time, when you were Robbie. Your entire life was a lie."

Grimalkin snorted. "Just because he cannot lie does not mean he cannot deceive, human. Robin Goodfellow is an expert at dancing around the truth."

“Oh, look who’s talking. If you’re not an expert at screwing people over, I’ll eat my head.”

Ironhorse snorted and shook his mane. “ENOUGH. TIME IS PRESSING. WE DO NOT HAVE TIME TO ARGUE. MEGHAN CHASE, WILL YOU ACCEPT MY HELP OR NOT?”

I looked him in the eye. His blank, rigid mask gazed back at me, expressionless and impassive. “Are you really here to help us?” I asked. “You really want to get the scepter back and stop the war?”

“YES.”

“And, you aren’t going to lead us into some kind of trap?”

“NO.”

I took a deep breath and let it out again. “That seems to be all the questions I can think of right now.”

“Here’s an important one,” Puck added. “Where *is* the scepter anyway, Rusty?”

Ironhorse blew a puff of steam at him. “I DO NOT ANSWER TO YOU, OLDBLOOD. MY BARGAIN IS WITH THE GIRL.”

“Yeah?” Puck’s grin grew dangerous. “What if I take you apart and turn you into a toaster oven? How’d you like that, tin can?”

“I WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY.”

“Guys, please!” This was as bad as refereeing the frequent threat-fests between Puck and Ash. “Enough with the posturing and testosterone. Ironhorse, if we’re going to do this, we need to know where the scepter is. We can’t follow you blindly into wherever.”

Ironhorse bobbed his head. “OF COURSE, MEGHAN CHASE.” I frowned at his compliancy, but he went on without pause. “THE SCEPTER OF THE SEASONS HAS BEEN TAKEN INTO THE MORTAL REALM. IT IS BEING HELD IN A PLACE CALLED SILICON VALLEY.”

“Silicon Valley? That’s in California.”

“YES.”

“Why there?”

“SILICON VALLEY WAS THE BIRTHPLACE OF LORD MACHINA,” Ironhorse said gravely. “MANY OF HIS LIEUTENANTS, LIKE VIRUS AND GLITCH, ALSO HAIL FROM THAT AREA. IT IS A REGION OF IRON FEY, ONE THAT THE OLDBLOODS—” he shot a glance at Puck “—AVOID COMPLETELY. IT IS THE IDEAL PLACE TO HIDE THE SCEPTER.”

“You can say that again,” I mused. Silicon Valley wasn’t just one city, it was every city in that area. “Finding the scepter will be like looking for a needle in a haystack—in a field of haystacks.”

“I CAN FIND IT.” Ironhorse raised his head, looking down his long nose at us. “I SWEAR IT. DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY THE WORDS? MEGHAN CHASE, I, IRONHORSE, LAST LIEUTENANT OF LORD MACHINA, WILL TAKE YOU TO THE SCEPTER OF THE SEASONS, AND I VOW TO PROTECT YOU UNTIL IT IS IN YOUR HANDS. THIS I SWEAR, ON MY HONOR AND MY DUTY TO THE TRUE MONARCH OF THE IRON COURT.”

I drew in a breath, and even Puck looked surprised. An oath like that meant the speaker was bound to fulfill it. Ironhorse wasn’t playing around. As I stood there gaping at him, Puck took my arm and turned me aside.

“What about Oberon?” he murmured. “He’s the only one who can remove the seal. If we go gallivanting off to California, you won’t have your magic to protect you.”

“We can’t worry about that now.” I shook off his hand. “The scepter is more important. Besides, that’s what I have *you* for.” I smiled at him, and turned to Ironhorse. “All right, Ironhorse. We have a deal. Take us to the scepter.”

“Finally.” Grimalkin stood and stretched, bottlebrush tail curling over his back. “You make decisions as slowly as you answer Summonings, human. I do hope this will not become a habit.”

“Wait. You’re coming, too? Why?”

“I am bored.” Grimalkin waved his tail languidly. “And you are always entertaining…except when I am waiting for you to arrive, of course. Besides, the lieutenant and I have business, as well.”

“You do?” I waited, but he didn’t elaborate. “What is it?”

He sniffed and half slitted his eyes. “None of your concern, human. And you will need my guidance, if you want to get the scepter as quickly as possible. I believe the closest trod to Silicon Valley is through the Briars.”

Puck’s eyebrows shot up. “The Briars? You’re risking an awful lot, cat. Why don’t we try a trod a little less, oh I don’t know…lethal? If we double back, we can use the trod through the Frost Meadows. That will bring us close to San Francisco, and we can easily hitch a ride from there.”

Grimalkin shook his head. “If we want to reach Silicon Valley, we must go through the thorns. Do not worry, I will not get you lost. The trod past the Frost Meadows has become inaccessible. It sits too close to Tir Na Nog.”

“Still don’t see the problem, cat.”

Ironhorse snorted. “THE FROST MEADOWS HAVE BECOME A BATTLEFIELD, ROBIN GOODFELLOW,” he said, making my stomach clench. “WINTER HAS ALREADY CUT A SWATH OF DESTRUCTION THROUGH THE WYLDWOOD, AND THEY ARE ADVANCING ON SUMMER AS WE SPEAK. THERE IS A HUGE ARMY OF UNSEELIE BETWEEN US AND THAT TROD. THE CAITH SITH IS RIGHT—WE CANNOT TURN BACK.”

“Of course I am,” Grimalkin agreed. “We go through the Briars.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, as Grim trotted off with his tail in the air, confident in his victory. “What are the Briars? Grimalkin? Hey!”

Grimalkin looked back, his eyes bright floating orbs in the gloom.

“I am not here to chitchat, human. If you truly want your question answered, ask your Puck. Perhaps he will be able to soften the reality for you. I would not.” He twitched his tail, and continued into the trees without looking back.

I looked at Puck. He grimaced and shot me a humorless smile.

“Right. The Briars. Just a second, Princess. Hey, Rusty,” he called, motioning to Ironhorse, who pinned back his ears, “why don’t you walk ahead of us, huh? I want your big ugly ass where I can see it.”

Ironhorse glared at him balefully, tossed his head, and strode after the quickly vanishing Grimalkin. The Iron faery left a faint path of destruction in his wake; branches curled away from him, plants withered and grass shriveled under his feet, leaving burned-out hoofprints on the trail. Shaking his head, Puck muttered something very rude under his breath and followed, leading us deeper into the wyldwood.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Briars

Later, after a night of following Grimalkin through increasingly thick forest, I decided that some questions are better left unanswered.

"The Briars," Puck began, keeping a wary eye on Ironhorse walking in front of us, "or Brambles or Thorns, or whatever you want to call it, is a maze. No one knows how big it really is, but it's huge. Some say it encircles the entire Nevernever. There are rumors that if you're in the wyldwood and start walking in any direction, you'll eventually hit the Briars. You can find patches growing most anywhere, from the Greatwood and the Venom Swamps, to the courts of Arcadia and Tir Na Nog."

"Like the Hedge," I murmured, remembering the tunnel of thorns in Oberon's court and the brambly escape route Grimalkin had used to get us out of Faery. The bramble wall surrounding the Seelie Court had opened for the cat, revealing a maze of tunnels in the thorns, and I'd followed him as he led me back to the mortal world.

Puck nodded. "That's another name for it. Though the Hedge is a tamer version of the real Briars. In Arcadia, the Hedge responds fairly consistently, taking you wherever you want to go within the court. Out here, in the wyldwood, the Briars are rather…sadistic."

"You make it sound like they're alive."

Puck gave me a very eerie stare. "They *are* alive, Princess," he warned in a low voice. "Not in the way that we're accustomed to, but do not take them lightly. The Briars are a force, one that cannot be tamed or understood, even by Oberon or Mab. And they're always hungry. It's easy to get in—getting out is the tricky part. Not only that, but the things that live in the Briars are always hungry, too."

I felt a chill run all the way down my spine. "And we're going through the Briars…why?"

“Because the Briars have the greatest concentration of trods in all the Nevernever,” Puck replied. “There are doors hidden throughout the Briars, some constantly shifting, some only appearing at a special time under special circumstances. Rumors are that, within the Briars, there is a trod to every doorway in the mortal realm, from an L.A. strip club to some kid’s bedroom closet. Find the right door, and you’re home free.” The grin grew wider, and he shook his head. “But you have to get to it first.”

* * *

RAIN HISSED through the branches of the trees, a cold, gray rain that leeched color from everything it touched. Even Puck’s bright auburn hair turned dull and colorless in the misty deluge. He’d rake his fingers through it, streaking his hair with red, only to have the rain soak through it once more, bleaching away the color. Grimalkin was nearly invisible; not even his eyes glimmered in the gloom.

Above us, the massive wall of black thorns rose into the air, tendrils creaking and curling about. Some of the thorns were longer than me, waving about like the spines of a sea urchin, and the whole thing bristled with eerie menace.

I shivered, even standing close to Ironhorse and the smoldering heat radiating from him. The Iron faery steamed in the rain, surrounded by writhing smoke, as water struck his hot metal skin and sizzled away. Ironhorse gazed up at the wall of thorns, craning his neck to stare at it, billowing like a small geyser in the storm.

“How do we get through?” I wondered.

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than the wall shifted. Branches creaked and moaned as they peeled away to reveal a narrow, spiky corridor through the thorns. Mist curled out of the hallway, and the space beyond was choked in shadow.

Puck crossed his arms. “Looks like we’re expected.” He looked down at Grimalkin, a gray ghost in the mist, calmly washing his front paws. “You sure you can get us through, cat?”

Grimalkin gave one paw a few more licks before standing up. Shaking himself so that water flew everywhere, he yawned, stretched and trotted forward without looking back. “Follow me and find out” were his last words before he vanished into the tunnel.

Puck rolled his eyes. Holding out his hand, he gave me an encouraging smile. “Come on, Princess. Don’t want to get separated in here.” I clasped his hand, and he curled his fingers tight around mine. “Let’s go, then. Rusty can bring up the rear. That way, if we’re jumped from behind, we won’t lose anything important.”

I felt Ironhorse’s indignant snort as we entered the tunnel, and I pressed closer to Puck as the shadows closed in on us like grasping fingers. Around us, the corridor pulsed with life, slithering, creaking, unfurling with faint hissing sounds. Whispers and strange voices drifted down the hallway, murmuring words I couldn’t quite understand. As we stepped in farther, the hole behind us shut with a quiet hiss, trapping us within the Briars.

“This way,” came Grimalkin’s disembodied voice up ahead. “Try to stay close.”

The bristly walls of the corridor seemed to press in on us. Puck didn’t release my hand, but we had to walk single file through the tunnel to avoid behind scratched. A couple times, I thought I saw a thorn or creeper actually move toward me, as if to prick my skin or catch my clothes. Once, I glanced back at Ironhorse to see how he was faring, but the thorns, much like the rest of the Nevernever, seemed loath to touch the great Iron fey, curling back from him as he passed.

The tunnel finally opened up into a small hollow with tunnels and paths twisting off in all directions. Overhead, the canopy of bramble shut out the light, so thick you couldn’t see the sky through the cracks. Bones lay here and there among the thorns, bleached white and gleaming in the darkness. A skull grinned at me from a tangle of brambles, empty eye sockets crawling with worms. I shuddered and turned my face into Puck’s shoulder.

“Where’s Grim?” I whispered.

“Here,” Grimalkin said, appearing out of nowhere. The cat leaped atop a large skull and regarded each of us in turn. “We are going deep into the Briars now,” he stated in a calm, very soft voice. “I would tell you what we might face, but perhaps it is better that I do not. Try to be silent. Do not separate. Do not go down another path. And stay away from any doors you come across. Many of the gates here are a one-way trip; go through one and you might not be able to go back. Are you ready?”

I raised my hand. “How do you know your way around this place, Grim?”

Grimalkin blinked. “I am a cat,” he said, and vanished down one of the tunnels.

* * *

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, my school took a field trip to a “haunted” corn maze on the outskirts of town, a week or so before Halloween. Sitting on the bus, listening to the boys brag about who would find his way out first, and the girls giggling in their own little groups, I made my own vow that I would do just as well. I remember walking down the rows of corn all by myself, feeling a thrill of both fear and excitement as I tried finding my way to the center and back again. And I remembered the sinking feeling in my gut when I knew I was lost, when I realized no one would help me, that I was alone.

This was ten thousand times worse.

The Briars were never still. They were always moving, slithering, reaching for you out of the corner of your eye. Sometimes, if you listened just right, you could almost hear them whisper your name. Deep within the tangled darkness, twigs snapped and branches rustled as *things* moved through the brambles. I never got a clear look, just glimpsed dark shapes shuffling away into the undergrowth. It creeped me out. Big-time.

The Briars went on, an endless maze of twisted thorns and gnarled branches, shifting, creaking and reaching out for us. As we ventured ever deeper, doors, frames and archways began appearing at odd intervals in completely random places. A faded red door hung perilously from an overhead branch, a tarnished *216* glimmering in the dim light. A filthy restroom stall, cracked and shedding green paint, stood near the edge of the path, so wrapped in thorns that it would be impossible to push the door open. Something lean and black slithered across our path and vanished through an open closet. As it creaked shut, I caught a glimpse of a child’s bedroom through the frame, and a crib outlined in moonlight, before thorny vines curled around the door and pulled it back into the Briars.

Grimalkin never hesitated, leading us on without a backward glance, passing gates and doors and strange, random things stuck in the tangled web of thorns. A mirror, a doll and an empty golf bag dangled from the

branches as we walked by, as well as the countless bones and sometimes full skeletons that littered the trail. Strange creatures watched us from the shadows, mostly unseen, just their eyes glowing in the dark. Black birds with human faces perched in the branches, observing us silently as we passed, like waiting vultures. At one point, Grimalkin pulled us all into a side tunnel, hissing at us to be quiet and not move. Moments later, a massive spider, easily the size of a car, crawled over the brambles directly overhead, and I bit my lip so hard that I tasted blood. Huge and shiny, with a splash of red across its bloated abdomen, it paused a moment, as if sensing warm blood and fluids were very close, waiting for the slightest tremor to betray its quarry.

We held our breath and pretended to be stone.

For several heart-pounding seconds, we crouched in the tunnel, feeling our muscles cramp and our hearts thud too loud in our chests. Above us, the spider sat perfectly still as well, patiently waiting for its prey to grow bored, to assume it was safe and make the first move that would be its last. Eventually, something rustled in the branches ahead, and it darted away, frighteningly quick for something that huge. The scream of some unfortunate creature pierced the air, and then silence.

For a few moments after the spider left, no one dared to move. Eventually, Grimalkin crept forward, poking his head out warily, scanning the thorns.

“Wait here,” he told us. “I will see if it is safe.” Slipping into the shadows like a ghost, he disappeared.

I sagged to my knees as the adrenaline wore off and my muscles started to shake, leaving me weak and nearly hyperventilating. I could handle goblins and bogeymen and evil, flesh-eating horses, but giant freaking spiders? That’s where I drew the line.

Puck knelt and put a hand on my shoulder. “You okay, Princess?”

I nodded, ready to make some snarky comment about the pest problem around here. But then, one of the thorns moved.

Frowning, I bent closer, squinting my eyes. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, the three-inch barb shivered and unfurled into a pair of pointed black wings, attached to a tiny faery with glittering eyes that glared with insectlike menace. Its spindly body was covered by a shiny black carapace. Spikes grew from its elbows and shoulders, and it clutched

a thorn-tipped spear in one tiny claw. As we stared at each other, the faery curled its lip, revealing teeth as sharp as needles, and flew at my face.

I jerked back, swatting wildly, and hit Puck, causing us both to tumble back. The faery dodged my flailing hands, buzzing around us like an angry wasp. I saw it pause, hovering in the air like an evil hummingbird, then streak forward with a raspy cry.

A gout of flame seared the air in front of me. I felt the blast of heat on my face, bringing tears to my eyes, and the faery disappeared into the fire. Its tiny, charred body dropped like a stone to the earth, curling in on itself, the delicate black wings seared away. It gave an insectlike twitch, then was still.

Ironhorse tossed his head and snorted, looking pleased as smoke curled from his nostrils. Puck grimaced as he pushed himself to his feet, holding out a hand to help me up.

"You know, I'm really starting to hate the insect life around here," he muttered. "Next time, remind me to bring a can of Off!"

"You didn't have to kill it," I told Ironhorse, dusting off my pants. "It was like three inches tall!"

"IT ATTACKED YOU." Ironhorse sounded puzzled, cocking his head at me. "IT CLEARLY HAD AGGRESSIVE INTENT. MY MISSION IS TO PROTECT YOU UNTIL WE RETRIEVE THE SCEPTER. I WILL ALLOW NOTHING TO BRING YOU HARM. THAT IS MY SOLEMN VOW."

"Yeah, but you don't need a machine gun to kill a fly."

"Human!" Grimalkin appeared, bounding up with his ears flattened to his head. "You are making too much noise. All of you are. We must leave this area, quickly." He glanced about, and the fur on his back started to rise. "It might already be too late."

"Ironhorse killed this teensy little faery—" I began, but Grimalkin hissed at me.

"Idiot human! Do you think that was the only one? Look around you!"

I did, and my heart nearly stopped. The thorns around us were moving, hundreds upon hundreds of them, unfurling into tiny faeries with pointed, gnashing teeth. The air filled with the sound of buzzing, and thousands of tiny black eyes glimmered through the thorns.

"Oh, this isn't good," Puck murmured as the buzz grew louder, more frantic. "I really, really wish I had that Off!"

“Run!” spit Grimalkin, and we ran.

The faeries swarmed around us, the hum of their wings vibrating the air, their high-pitched voices shrieking in my ears. I felt the weight of their tiny bodies on my skin, an instant before the stings, and flailed wildly, trying to dislodge them. Puck snarled something unintelligible, swiping at them with his knives, and Ironhorse blasted flame from his mouth and nostrils, roaring. Charred, dismembered faeries dropped shrieking from the air, but dozens more buzzed in to take their place. Grimalkin, of course, had vanished. We charged blindly down a tunnel of thorns, through swarms of furious killer wasp-fey, with no clue of where we were going.

As I rounded a corner, a body appeared right in front of me. I had no time to react before I crashed into it, and we both went sprawling.

“Ow! What the hell!” someone yelped.

Swatting faeries, I looked into the face of a girl a year or two younger than me. She was tiny and Asian, with hair that looked as if she’d taken a machete to it, wearing a ratty sweater two sizes too big. For a second, my mind went blank with the shock at seeing another human, until I saw the furry ears peeking out of her hair.

We blinked at each other for a second, before the sting from a killer-wasp faerie snapped me out of my daze. Flailing, I scrambled to my feet as the swarm buzzed around the strange girl as well. She yelped and swatted wildly, backing away.

“What is this?” she hissed, as Puck came up behind me and Ironhorse charged in, blowing flame. “Who the hell are you people? Oh, never mind! Run!” She darted past us, looking back once to shout “Hurry up, Nelson!” over her shoulder. I barely had time to wonder who Nelson was when a kid built like a linebacker barreled through us, somehow dodging Puck and Ironhorse, and pounded after the girl. I caught a glimpse of gorillalike shoulders, muddy blond hair, and skin as green as swamp water. He clutched a backpack in his arms like a football and charged down the trail without a backward glance.

“Who were they?” I asked, over the buzzing of the swarm and my own frantic flailing.

“No time,” Puck said, slapping at a faery on his neck. “Ow! Dammit, we have to get out of here! Come on!”

We had started down the path again when a roar shook the air ahead of us, causing the swarm of killer fey to freeze in midair. It came again,

guttural and savage, as something rattled the wall of thorns, coming toward us with the sound of snapping wood. I sensed hundreds of creatures in the brambles fleeing for their lives.

The faeries scattered. Buzzing in terror, they vanished into the hedge, through cracks and tiny spaces between the thorns. In seconds, the whole swarm had disappeared. I peered through the branches and saw something coming down the trail, ripping through the wall of thorns like it wasn't there. Something black and scaly, and much, much bigger than the spider.

Is that what I think it is?

"Thiiiief!" roared a deep, inhuman voice, before a gout of flame burst through the hedge, setting an entire section on fire, making the air explode with heat. Ironhorse bugled, rearing up in alarm. Puck cursed, grabbed my arm, and yanked me back the way we came.

We fled down the trail after the strange girl and her muscle-necked companion, feeling the heat from the monster's fire at our backs. *"Thieves!"* the terrible voice snarled, staying right on our heels. *"I can smell you! I can feel your breath and hear your hearts. Give me back what is mine!"*

"Great," Puck panted, as Ironhorse cantered beside us, bellowing that he would shield me from the flames. "Just great. I hate spiders. I hate wasps. But, you know what I hate even more than that?"

The thing behind us roared, and another blast of flame seared the branches overhead. I winced as we ran beneath a rain of cinders and flaming twigs. "Dragons?" I gasped.

"Remind me to kill Grimalkin next time we see him."

The trail narrowed, then shrank down to a tight, thorny tunnel that twisted off into the darkness. Bending down and peering into it, I could just make out a door at the end of the burrow. And, I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw the door shut.

"I think I see a door!" I called, looking over my shoulder. Puck nodded impatiently.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Princess! Go!"

"What about Ironhorse?"

"He'll have to squeeze!" Puck pushed me toward the mouth, but I resisted. "Come on, Princess. We don't want to be in the middle of that if Deathbreath decides to sneeze on us."

"We can't leave him behind!"

“WORRY NOT, PRINCESS,” Ironhorse said, and I gaped at him, not believing my eyes. Where a horse had been, now a man stood before me, dark and massive, with a square jaw and fists the size of hams. He wore jeans and a black shirt that bulged with all the muscles underneath, the skin stretched tight over steely tendons. Dreadlocks spilled from his scalp like a mane, and his eyes still burned with that intense red glow. “YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE WITH A FEW TRICKS UP YOUR SLEEVE, GOODFELLOW,” he said, a faint smirk beneath his voice. “NOW, GO. I WILL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU.”

With a horrible cracking sound, the dragon’s head rose above the briars on a long, snaking neck, looming to an impossible height. It was bigger than I’d imagined, a long toothy maw covered in black-green scales, ivory horns curling back from its skull to frame the sky. Alien, red-gold eyes scanned the ground impassively, gleaming with cunning and intelligence. *“I see you, little thieves.”*

Puck gave me a shove, and I tumbled into the burrow, scratching my hands and knees and jabbing myself on the thorns. Cursing, I looked up and saw two familiar golden eyes floating before me in the dark.

“Hurry, human,” Grimalkin hissed, and fled down the burrow.

The tunnel seemed to shrink the farther I went, scraping my back and catching my hair and clothes as I followed Grimalkin, bent over like a crab. I heard Puck and Ironhorse behind me, felt the glare of the dragon’s eye at my back, and cursed as my sleeve caught on a thorn. We were going too slow! The red door loomed at the end of the tunnel, a beacon of light and safety, so far away. But as I got closer, I saw Grimalkin standing in front of it, ears flattened against his skull, hissing and baring his teeth.

“Saint-John’s-wort,” he snarled, and I saw a cluster of dried yellow flowers hanging on the door like tiny sunbursts. “The fey cannot enter with that on the door. Take it down, quickly, human!”

“Burn, little thieves!”

Fire exploded down the tunnel, writhing and twisting in a maelstrom of heat and fury, shooting toward us. I ripped the flowers off the door and dove through, Puck and Ironhorse toppling in after me. Flames shot over my head, singeing my back as I lay gasping on a cold cement floor. Then, the door slammed shut, cutting off the fire, and we were plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Leanansidhe

For a few moments, I lay there on the concrete, my body curiously hot and cold at the same time. My neck, my shoulders, and the backs of my legs burned from the fire that had come way too close for comfort. But my cheek and stomach pressed into the cold cement, making me shiver. To either side of me, Puck and Ironhorse struggled to their feet with muffled curses and groans.

"Well, that was fun," Puck muttered, helping me stand. "I swear, if I ever see those two kids again, we're going to have a little chat. If you're going to steal from a fifty-foot, fire-breathing lizard with the memory of an elephant, you'd better have a damn impressive riddle, or you wait until it isn't home. And who the hell put Saint-John's-wort over the door? I'm feeling very unwelcome right now."

A flashlight clicked on in the shadows, blinding me. Shielding my eyes, I counted three silhouettes at the end of the beam. Two I recognized; the tiny girl with furry ears and the green-skinned boy we'd met in the Briars. The last, the one holding the flashlight, was tall and skinny, with thick dark hair, a scraggly goatee, and two ridged horns curling up from his brow. He held a cross in the other hand, raised in front of his face like he was warding off a vampire.

Puck laughed. "Hate to break it to you, kid, but unless you're a priest, that isn't going to work. Neither is the salt you have poured across the floor. I'm not your average bogey."

"Damn faeries," spit goatee boy, looking pale. "How did you get in here? You'd better leave right now, if you know what's good for you. *She'll* tear your guts out and make harp strings with them."

"Well, there's a problem with that," Puck continued with mock regret. "See, right outside that door is a very pissed off reptile who is eager to turn us into shish kebab, because *you three* were stupid enough to steal

from a dragon." He sighed and shook his head in a disappointed manner. "You know dragons never forget a thief, don't you? So, what'd you take?"

"None of your business, faery," goat boy shot back. "And maybe I wasn't clear when I said you're not welcome here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out three iron nails, holding them between white, shaking knuckles. "Maybe a faceful of iron will convince you otherwise."

I stepped forward, shooting Puck a warning glare before he could rise to the challenge. "Take it easy," I soothed, holding up my hands. "We don't want any trouble. We're just trying to get through the Briars, that's all."

"Warren!" gasped the girl, staring at me wide-eyed. "It's her!"

All eyes flashed to me.

"It *is* you," Warren breathed. "You're her, aren't you? Oberon's half-blood. The Summer princess."

Ironhorse growled and pressed closer, causing the trio to shrink back. I put a hand on his chest. "How do you know me?"

"*She's* looking for you, you know. Got half the exiles looking for you —"

"Whoa, slow down, goat-boy." Puck held up a hand. "Who is this remarkable *she* you keep talking about?"

Warren shot him a look that was half fearful, half awe. "*Her,* of course. The boss of this place. So…if this is Oberon's daughter, you must be him, aren't you? Robin Goodfellow? The Puck?" Puck smiled, which caused Warren to swallow noisily. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "But —" he glanced at Ironhorse "—she didn't say anything about him. Who's he?"

"Stinks," rumbled the green-skinned boy, curling his lip to reveal blunt, uneven teeth. "Smells like coal. Like iron."

Warren's eyebrows shot up. "Aw, crap. He's one of *them,* isn't he? One of those Iron faeries! She won't be happy about this."

"He's with me," I said quickly, as Ironhorse drew himself up. "He's safe, I promise you. And who do you keep talking about? Who is this *she?*"

"Her name is Leanansidhe," Warren stated, as if I were an idiot for not figuring it out. "Leanansidhe the Dark Muse. Queen of the Exiles."

Puck's eyebrows arched into his hair.

"You're kidding," he said, his face caught between a grimace and a smirk. "So, Leanansidhe fancies herself a queen, now? Oh, Titania will

love that."

"Who's Leanansidhe?" I asked.

The grimace won out. He shook his head and turned to me, his face grim. "Bad news, Princess. At one time, Leanansidhe was one of the most powerful beings in all the Nevernever. The Dark Muse, they called her, because she inspired many great artists, helping them produce their most brilliant works. You might recognize some of the mortals she's helped—James Dean, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain."

"No way."

Puck shrugged. "But, as you should know, such help always comes with a price. None whom Leanansidhe inspires lives very long, ever. Their lives are brilliant, colorful, and very brief. Sometimes, if the artist was particularly special, she'd take him back to the Nevernever to entertain her for eternity. Or until she got bored. Of course, this was before…" He trailed off, giving me a sideways look.

"Before what?"

"Titania banished her to the mortal realm," Puck said quickly, as if he was really going to say something else. "According to some, Leanansidhe was growing too powerful, had too many mortals worshipping her, and there was talk that she wanted to make herself queen. Naturally, this made our good Summer Queen more than a little jealous, so she exiled the self-proclaimed Queen of Muse and sealed off all trods to her, so that Leanansidhe could never return to Faery. That was several years ago, and no one has seen or heard from her since.

"But, apparently," Puck continued, glancing at the three teenagers listening in rapt fascination, "Leanansidhe has a new following. A new little mortal cult ready to throw themselves at her feet." He smothered a laugh. "Pickings must be pretty slim nowadays."

"Hey," said the girl, narrowing her eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why is Leanansidhe looking for me?" I asked, before an unpleasant thought drifted to mind. "You…you don't think she wants revenge, for what Titania did to her?" Great. That was all I needed, another faery queen who was out to get me. I must hold some sort of record.

We glared at Warren, who stepped back and raised his hands. "Hey, man. Don't look at me. I don't know what she wants. Just that she's been looking for you."

“WE CANNOT GO TO THIS LEANANSIDHE NOW,” Ironhorse boomed, making the teens jump and the ceiling rattle. God, he couldn’t speak quietly if his life depended on it. “OUR MISSION IS URGENT. WE MUST GET TO CALIFORNIA AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.”

“Well, we’re not going anywhere now, not with ol’ Deathbreath guarding the only way out.”

“Come with us.”

I looked up. Warren had spoken and was staring at me intently. The eager look in his eyes made me uncomfortable, as did his sudden change in mood. “Come with us to Leanansidhe’s,” he urged. “She could help. You want to go to California? She can get you there, easy—”

“Warren,” said the girl, grabbing his sleeve and pulling him aside. “Come here a second, would you? ’Scuse us a sec, people.” Surprisingly strong for her size, she dragged him into a far corner. Huddled against the wall, they whispered furiously to each other, casting suspicious glances at Ironhorse over their shoulders.

“What are we going to do?” I wondered. “Should we wait until the dragon leaves to find our way back through the Briars? Or should we find out what Leanansidhe wants?”

“NO,” thundered Ironhorse, his voice bouncing off the walls. “I DO NOT TRUST THIS LEANANSIDHE. IT IS TOO DANGEROUS.”

“Puck?”

He shrugged. “Under normal circumstances, I’d agree with the toaster oven,” he said, earning a hard glare from Ironhorse. “Leanansidhe has always been unpredictable, and she has enough power to make that dragon look like a cranky Gila monster. But…I always say the enemy you know is better than the enemy you can’t see.”

I nodded. “I agree. If Leanansidhe is looking for us, I think we should meet her on our own terms. Otherwise, I’d just worry about what she’s sending after us.”

“Besides…” Puck rolled his eyes. “I think we have another problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Our trusty guide has gone AWOL.”

I looked around, but Grimalkin had vanished, and he didn’t respond to my hissed calls for him to show himself. The street kids were watching us now, eager and hesitant at the same time. I sighed. There was no telling

where Grimalkin was, or when he'd return. Really, there was just one option.

"So." I gave them a hopeful smile. "How far is Leanansidhe's?"

* * *

TURNS OUT, we were in the basement of her mansion.

"So, Leanansidhe has you guys steal from dragons?" I asked the girl as we walked down the dimly lit corridors, torchlight flickering over the damp stone walls. Whatever the house looked like, the basement was huge. It reminded me of a medieval dungeon, complete with heavy doors, wooden portcullises, and gargoyles leering at us from the walls. Mice scurried over the floor, and other things moved in the shadows, just out of sight.

The girl, Kimi, grinned at me. "Leanansidhe has lots of clients with very unusual tastes," she explained. "Most of them are exiles, like her, who can't go back into the Nevernever for some reason. She uses us—" she gestured to herself and Nelson "—to fetch things she can't get herself, like that thing with the dragon. Apparently, a banished Winter sidhe in New York is paying a fortune for real dragon eggs."

"You stole its *eggs?*"

"Only one." Kimi giggled at my stunned expression. "Then the stupid lizard woke up and we had to book it." She giggled again, smoothing down her ears. "Don't worry, we're not going to decimate the dragon population. Leanansidhe told us to leave a couple behind."

Puck made a noise that might've been appreciation. "And what do you guys get out of this?"

"Free room and board. And the rep that goes with it. We'd be out on the streets, otherwise." Kimi and Nelson shared a secret glance, but Warren was staring at me. He'd been doing that since we left to meet Leanansidhe, and it was making me very uncomfortable.

"The pay's not bad, either," Kimi went on, oblivious to Warren's scrutiny. "At least, it's better than the alternative—being hunted down for what we are, getting stepped on by the exiles and the fey who just like it better in the mortal realm. Leanansidhe's made it safer for us—you don't screw around with the queen's pets. Even the redcap gangs know to leave you alone. For the most part, anyway."

“Why?” I asked. “You’re exiles, too, right? Why should it be different for you?” I looked at her furry, tufted ears, at Nelson’s swamp-water skin and Warren’s horns. They weren’t human, that much was certain. But then I remembered Warren holding out the iron cross, his fearful *damned faeries,* how they could get through the door when Grimalkin couldn’t. And I knew what they were even before Kimi said it.

“Because,” she said cheerfully, twitching her ears, “we’re half-breeds. I’m half-phouka, Nelson’s half-troll, and Warren is part-satyr. And if there’s one thing an exile hates more than the fey who banished him, its half-breeds like us.”

I hadn’t thought of that before, though it made sense. I suspected half-breeds like Kimi, Nelson and Warren had it pretty tough. Without Oberon’s protection, they would’ve been left to the whims of the true fey, who probably made life very difficult for them. It wasn’t surprising they would make a deal with this Queen of the Exiles, in exchange for some degree of protection. Even if it meant stealing dragon eggs right out from under the dragon.

“Oh, and by the way,” Kimi went on, with a quick glance at Ironhorse, clanking along behind me. “Leanansidhe knows about…um…*his kind.* They’ve been killing off lots of exiles lately, and it’s making her mad. Your ‘friend’ should be really careful around her. I don’t know how she’ll take an Iron faery in her living room. I’ve seen her throw a fit for less.”

“Shut up, Kimi,” Warren said abruptly. We had reached the end of the hall, where a bright red door waited for us atop a flight of stairs. “I told you, it’s not a big deal.”

I frowned at him, but something caught my attention. Strains of music drifted down the steps, the low, shivery chords of a piano or organ. The music was dark and haunting, reminding me of a play I’d seen a long time ago, *The Phantom of the Opera.* I remembered Mom dragging me to the theater when the play came through our little town, shortly before Ethan was born. I remembered thinking I’d have to sit through three hours of absolute boredom and torture, but from the first booming organ chords, I was completely entranced.

I also remembered Mom crying through several of the scenes, something she never did, even with the saddest movies. I didn’t think anything of it then, but it seemed a little odd, now.

We stepped up and through the doorway into a magnificent foyer, with a double grand staircase sweeping toward a high vaulted ceiling and a roaring fireplace surrounded by plush black sofas. The hardwood floor gleamed red, the walls were patterned in red and black, and gauzy black curtains covered the high arched windows near the back of the room. Nearly every clear space on the wall was taken up by paintings—oil paintings, watercolors, black-and-white sketches. The Mona Lisa smiled her odd little smile on the far wall, next to a weird, disjointed painting that was probably Picasso.

Music echoed through the room, dark and haunting piano chords played with such force that they made the air vibrate and my teeth buzz. An enormous grand piano stood in the corner near the fireplace, the flames dancing in the reflection of the polished wood. Hunched over the keys, a figure in a rumpled white shirt beat and pounded the ivory bars, fingers flying.

"Who—?"

"Shh!" Kimi shushed me with a light smack on the arm. "Don't talk. *She* doesn't like it when someone's playing."

I fell silent, studying the pianist again. Brown hair hung limp and shaggy on his shoulders, looking as if it hadn't been washed in days. His shoulders were broad, though his shirt hung loose on a lean, bony frame that was so thin his spine pressed tightly against his skin.

The song ended with one last, vibrating chord. As the notes faded and silence descended on the room, the man remained hunched over the keys. I couldn't see his face, but I thought his eyes were closed, and his muscles trembled as if from exertion. He seemed to be waiting for something. I looked to the others, wondering if we should applaud.

A slow clapping came from the top of the stairs. I looked up and saw none other than Grimalkin, sitting on the railing with his tail around his feet, looking perfectly at home. Any annoyance I felt with him disappeared at the sight of his companion.

A woman stood on the balcony, her gold and crimson gown billowing around her, though I was sure there'd been no one there a second ago. Her wavy, waist-length hair shimmered like strands of copper, almost too bright to look at, floating around her face as if it weighed nothing at all. She was pale and tall and magnificent, every inch a queen, and I felt my

stomach contract. Forget Arcadia or Tir Na Nog; we were in her court now, playing by her rules. I wondered if she expected us to bow.

"Bravo, Charles." Her voice was pure song, made of poetry given sound, of every creative notion you've ever had. Hearing it, I felt I could sweep onto a stage and bring the masses roaring and screaming to their feet. "That was quite magnificent. You can go now."

The man rose shakily to his feet, grinning like a little kid whose finger painting had been praised by the teacher. He was younger than my stepdad, but not by much, the hint of a beard shadowing his mouth and jaw. When he turned and spotted us, I shivered. His face and hazel eyes were blank of reason, as empty as the sky.

"Poor bastard," I heard Puck mutter. "He's been here awhile, hasn't he?"

The man blinked at me, dazed for a moment, but then his eyes grew wide. "You," he muttered, shambling forward, jabbing at me with a finger. I frowned. "I know you. Don't I? Don't I? Who are you? Who?" He frowned, an anguished expression crossing his face. "The rats whisper in the darkness," he said, clutching at his hair. "They whisper. I can't remember their names. They tell me…" His eyes narrowed and he panted, glaring at me. "Rag girl, flying round my bed. Who are you? *Who?*" This last was a shout, and he lurched forward.

Ironhorse stepped between us with a rumbling growl, and the man leaped back, hands flying to his face. "No," he whimpered, cringing on the floor, arms cradling his head. "No one in here. Empty empty empty. Who am I? I don't know. The rats tell me, but I forget."

"That is enough." Leanansidhe floated down the staircase, her gown trailing behind her. Sweeping up to the human, she touched him lightly on the head. "Charles, darling, I have guests now," she murmured, as he gazed up at her with teary eyes. "Why don't you take a bath, and then you can play for us at dinner?"

Charles sniffled. "Girl," he whimpered, clutching at his hair. "In my head."

"Yes, I know, darling. But if you don't leave, I'll have to turn you into a harp. Go on, now. Shoo, shoo." She made little fluttery motions with her hands, and with one final glance at me, the man scuttled away.

Leanansidhe sighed and turned to us, then seemed to notice the trio for the first time. "Ah, there you are." She smiled, and their faces lit up in the

glow of her attention. “Did you manage to get the eggs, darlings?”

Warren snatched the backpack from Nelson’s arm and held it out. “We found the nest, Leanansidhe. It was just where you said. But the dragon woke up then, and…” He unzipped the pack, revealing a yellow-green egg the size of a basketball. “We were only able to get one.”

“One?” Leanansidhe frowned, and shadows fell over the room. “Only one? I need at least two, pets, or the deal is off. The former Duke of Frostfell specifically said a pair of eggs. How many is in a pair, darling?”

“T-two,” Warren stammered.

“Well, then. I’d say you still have work to do. Go on, now. Chop-chop. And don’t come back without those eggs!”

The trio fled without hesitation, following the human out the same door. Leanansidhe watched them go, then whirled on us with a bright, feral smile. “Well! Here we are at last. When Grimalkin told me you were coming, I was ever so pleased. It’s so *good* to finally meet you.”

Grimalkin descended the stairs with his typical indifference, completely unfazed by the Death Glares coming from me and Puck. Leaping onto a sofa, he sat down and began grooming his tail.

“And Puck!” Leanansidhe turned to him, clasping her hands in delight. “I haven’t seen you in forever, darling. How is Oberon these days? Still being henpecked by that basilisk of a wife?”

“Don’t insult the basilisks,” Puck replied, smiling. Crossing his arms, he gazed around the room, moving ever so slightly in front of me. “So, Lea, looks like you’ve been busy. What’s up with the crazies and the half-bloods? Building an army of misfits?”

“Don’t be silly, darling.” Leanansidhe sniffed, plucking a cigarette holder from a lamp stand. She took a puff and blew a hazy green cloud over our heads. It writhed and twisted into a smoky dragon before dissipating in the air. “My coup days are behind me, now. I’ve made a nice little realm for myself here, and overthrowing a court is so tedious. However, I’d ask you not to tell Titania that you found me, darling. If you went and blabbed, I might have to rip out your tongue.” She smiled, examining a bloodred nail, as Puck inched closer to me. “Also, Robin dear, you needn’t worry about protecting the girl. I mean her no harm. The Iron faery I might have to dismember and send its remains to Asia—” Ironhorse tensed and took a step forward “—but I have no intention of

hurting the daughter of Oberon. So relax, pet. That's not why I called her here."

"Ironhorse is with me," I said quickly, putting a hand on his arm before he did something stupid. "He won't hurt anything, I promise."

Leanansidhe turned the full brunt of her glittering sapphire gaze on me. "You're so *cute*, did you know that? You look just like your father. No wonder Titania can't stand to look at you. What's your name, darling?"

"Meghan."

She smiled, vicious and challenging, appraising me. "And what's a cutie like you going to do if I want that abomination out of my home? That's quite the binding you've got there, dove. I doubt you can scrape up the glamour to light my cigarette."

I swallowed. This was a test. If I was going to save Ironhorse, I couldn't falter. Steeling myself, I looked into those cold blue eyes, ancient and remorseless, and held her gaze. "Ironhorse is one of my companions," I said softly. "I need him, so I can't let you hurt him. I'll make a deal with you, if that's what it takes, but he stays here. He's not your enemy, and he won't hurt you or anyone under your protection. You have my word."

"I know that, darling." Leanansidhe continued to hold my stare, smiling all the while. "I'm not worried about the Iron faery harming me. I'm worried I won't be able to get his stink out of my carpets. But, no matter." She straightened, releasing me from her gaze. "You've given your word, and I'll hold you to that. Now, come darling. Dinner first, then we can talk. Oh, and please tell your iron pet not to touch anything while he's here. I don't want him melting the glamour."

* * *

WE FOLLOWED Leanansidhe down several long corridors carpeted in red and black velvet, past portraits whose eyes seemed to follow us as we walked by. Leanansidhe didn't stop talking, a mindless, bubbly stream, as she led us through her home, spouting names, places and creatures I didn't recognize. But I couldn't stop listening to the sound of her voice, even if all I heard was chipmunk chatter. In my peripheral vision, I caught glimpses of rooms through half-opened doors, drenched in shadow or strange, flickering lights. Sometimes, I thought the rooms looked weird, as if there were trees growing out of the floor, or schools of fish swimming

through the air. But Leanansidhe's voice cut through my curiosity, and I couldn't take my eyes from her, even for a closer look.

We entered a vast dining hall, where a long table took up most of the left wall, surrounded by chairs of glass and wood. Candelabra floated down the length of the surface, hovering over a feast that could feed an army. Platters of meat and fish, raw fruits and vegetables, tiny cakes, candies, bottles of wine, and a huge roast pig with an apple in its mouth as the centerpiece. Except for the flickering candlelight, the room was pitch-black, and I could hear things scurrying about, muttering in the darkness.

Leanansidhe breezed into the room, trailing smoke from her cigarette, and stood at the head of the table. "Come, darlings," she called, beckoning us with the back of her gloved hand. "You look famished. Sit. Eat. And please don't be so rude as to think the food glamoured or enchanted. What kind of host do you think I am?" She sniffed, as though the very thought annoyed her, and looked away into the shadows. "Excuse me," she called, as we cautiously moved toward the table. "Minions? I have guests, and you are making me look impolite. I will not be pleased if my reputation is soured, darlings."

Movement in the shadows, muttering and low shuffles, as a group of little men edged into the light. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. They were redcaps, evil-eyed and shark-toothed, with their hats dipped in the blood of their victims, but they were also dressed in matching butler suits with pink bow ties. Sullen and scowling, they emerged from the darkness, glaring for all they were worth. *Laugh and die*, their eyes warned, but Puck took one look at them and started cracking up. The redcaps glared at him like they were going to bite his head off.

One of them caught sight of Ironhorse and let out a piercing hiss that sent all of them scrambling back. "Iron!" he screeched, baring his jagged fangs. "That's one of them stinking Iron faeries! Kill it! Kill it now!"

Ironhorse roared, and Puck's dagger flashed out, a devilish grin stretching his face at the thought of violence. The redcaps surged forward, snarling and gnashing their teeth, just as eager. I grabbed a silver knife from the table and held it ready as the redcaps lunged forward. One of them leaped onto the table, gathering his short legs under him to launch himself at us, fangs gleaming.

"That is *enough!*"

We froze. It was impossible not to. Even the redcap on the table locked up, then fell into a bowl of fruit salad.

Leanansidhe stood at the end of the table, glowering at us all. Her eyes glowed amber, her hair whipped away from her face, and the candelabra flames danced wildly. For a heart-stopping moment, she stood there, alien and terrifying. Then she sighed, smoothed back her hair and reached for her cigarette holder, taking a long drag. As she blew out the smoke, things returned to normal, including our ability to move, but no one, least of all the redcaps, had any aggressive thoughts left.

"Well?" she finally said, looking to the redcaps as if nothing had happened. "What are you minions standing about for? My seat isn't going to move itself."

The largest redcap, a burly fellow with a bone fishhook through his nose, shook himself and crept forward, pulling Leanansidhe's chair away from the table. The others followed suit, looking like they'd rather beat us to death with our own arms, but wordlessly drew out our chairs. The one attending Ironhorse growled and bared his teeth at the Iron faery, then darted away as quickly as he could.

"I apologize for the minions," Leanansidhe said when we were all seated. She touched her fingers to her temple, as if she had a headache. "It's so hard to find good help these days, darlings. You have no idea."

"I thought I recognized them," Puck said, casually reaching for a pear near the center of the table. "Isn't the leader Razor Dan, or something like that? Caused a bit of a stir during the Goblin Wars, when they tried selling information to both sides?"

"Nasty business, darling." Leanansidhe snapped her fingers twice, and a brownie melted out of the darkness with a wine flute and a bottle, scrambling onto a stool to fill her glass. "Everyone knows you don't cheat the goblin tribes if you know what's good for you. Like poking a stick down an ant nest." She sipped the wine the brownie poured her and sighed. "They came to me for asylum, after pissing off every goblin tribe in the wyldwood, so I put them to work. That's the rule here, darling. You stay, you work."

I glanced in the direction the redcaps left, feeling their hateful gaze staring out from the darkness. "But aren't you afraid they'll get mad and eat someone?"

“Not if they know what’s good for them, darling. And you’re not eating anything. Eat.” She gestured at the food, and I suddenly realized how hungry I was. I reached for a platter of tiny frosted cakes, too hungry to care about glamours or enchantments anymore. If I was munching on a toadstool or a grasshopper, so be it. Ignorance is bliss.

“While you’re here,” Leanansidhe continued, smiling as we ate, “you leave all personal vendettas behind. That’s my other rule. I can easily deny them sanctuary, and then where will they be? Back in the mortal realm, dying slowly or fighting it out with the Iron fey who are gradually infesting every town and city in the world. No offense, darling,” she added, smiling at Ironhorse, implying the exact opposite. Staring blindly at the table, Ironhorse didn’t respond. He wasn’t eating anything, and I figured he either didn’t want to be indebted to Leanansidhe, or he didn’t eat regular food. Thankfully, Leanansidhe didn’t seem to notice. “Most choose not to take the risk,” she went on, stabbing her cigarette holder in the direction the redcaps had fled. “Take the minions, for example. Every so often, one will poke his nose back in the mortal realm, get it hacked off by some goblin mercenary, and come crawling back to me. Exiles, half-breeds and outcasts alike. I’m their only safe haven between the Nevernever and the mortal world.”

“Which begs the question,” Puck asked, almost too casually. “Where *are* we, anyway?”

“Ah, pet.” Leanansidhe smiled at him, but it was a frightening thing, cold and vicious. “I was wondering when you would ask that. And if you think you should run and tattle on me to your masters, don’t bother. I’ve done nothing wrong. I haven’t broken my exile. This is my realm, yes, but Titania can relax. It doesn’t intrude upon hers in any way.”

“Okay, totally not the question I asked.” Puck paused with an apple in hand, raising an eyebrow. “And I think I’m even more alarmed now. Where are we, Lea?”

“The Between, darling.” Leanansidhe leaned back, sipping her wine. “The veil between the Nevernever and the mortal realm. Surely you’ve realized that by now.”

Both Puck’s eyebrows shot up into his hair. “The Between? The Between is full of nothing, or so I was led to believe. Those who get stuck Between usually go insane in very short order.”

“Yes, I’ll admit, it was difficult to work with at first.” Leanansidhe waved her hand airily. “But, enough about me, darlings. Let’s talk about you.” She took a drag on her cigarette and blew a smoky fish over the table. “Why were you tromping around the Briars when my streetrats found you? I thought you were looking for the Scepter of the Seasons, and you certainly won’t find it down there, darlings. Unless you think Bellatorallix is sitting on it.”

I started. Ironhorse jerked up, sending a bowl of grapes clattering to the floor. Brownies appeared from nowhere, scurrying to recover the lost fruit as it rolled about the tile. Leanansidhe raised a slender eyebrow and took another drag on her cigarette as we recovered.

“You knew?” I stared at her, as the brownies set the bowl on the table again and scampered off. “You knew about the scepter?”

“Darling, please.” Leanansidhe gave me a half scornful, half patronizing look. “I know everything that happens within the courts. I find it unforgivable to be so out of the loop, and it’s terribly boring here otherwise. My informants clue me in on all the important details.”

“Spies, you mean,” Puck said.

“Such a dirty word, darling.” Leanansidhe *tsked* at him. “And it doesn’t matter now. What matters is what I can tell you. I know the scepter was stolen from under Mab’s nose, I know Summer and Winter are about to go to a bloody war over it, and I know that the scepter is not in the Nevernever but in the mortal realm. And—” she took a long drag on her cigarette and sent a hawk soaring over our heads “—I can help you find it.”

I was instantly suspicious, and I could tell Ironhorse and Puck felt the same. “Why?” I demanded. “What’s in it for you?”

Leanansidhe looked at me, and a shadow crept into her voice, making it dark and ominous. “Darling, I’ve seen what’s been happening in the mortal realm. Unlike Oberon and Mab, who hide in their safe little courts, I know the reality pressing in on us from every side. The Iron fey are getting stronger. They’re everywhere: in computers, crawling out of television screens, massing in factories. I have more exiles under my roof now than I’ve had in the past century. They’re terrified, unwilling to walk in the mortal realm any longer, because the Iron fey are tearing them apart.”

I shuddered, and Ironhorse had gone very still. Leanansidhe paused, and nothing could be heard except the faint skittering of things unseen in the pressing darkness.

"If Summer and Winter go to war, and the Iron fey attack, there will be nothing left. If the Iron fey win, the Nevernever will become uninhabitable. I don't know what that will do to the Between, but I'm sure it will be quite fatal for me. So you see, darling," Leanansidhe said, taking a sip of wine, "it would be advantageous for me to help you. And since I have eyes and ears everywhere within the mortal realm, it would be prudent of you to accept."

Ironhorse shifted, then spoke for the first time. To his credit, he tried to keep his voice down, but even then it echoed around the room. "YOUR OFFER IS APPRECIATED," he rumbled, "BUT WE ALREADY KNOW WHERE THE SCEPTER IS LOCATED."

"Do you now?" Leanansidhe shot him a vicious smile. "Where?"

"SILICON VALLEY."

"Lovely. *Where* in Silicon Valley, pet?"

A pause. "I DO NOT—"

"And how do you plan on getting to the scepter once you find it, darling? Walk in the front door?"

Ironhorse glowered at her. "I WILL FIND A WAY."

"I see." Leanansidhe gave him a scornful look. "Well, let me tell you what *I* know about Silicon Valley, pet, so the princess has an idea of what she's up against. It's the gremlins' spawning ground. You know, those nasty little things that crawl out of computers and other machines. There are literally thousands of them down there, perhaps hundreds of thousands, as well as some very powerful Iron fey who would turn you into bloody strips as soon as look at you. You go down there without a plan, darling, and you're walking into a death trap. Besides, you're already too late." Leanansidhe snapped her fingers, holding out her glass for more wine. "I've been keeping tabs on the scepter's movements ever since I heard it was stolen. It was being held in a large office building in San Jose, but my spies tell me it's been moved. Apparently, someone already tried to get in and steal it back, but didn't quite succeed. Now, the building has been cleared out, and the scepter is gone."

"Ash," I whispered, glancing at Puck. "It had to be Ash." Puck looked doubtful, so I turned back to Leanansidhe, a cold desperation spreading

through my stomach. “What happened to him, the one who tried to take the scepter? Where is he now?”

“I’ve no idea, pet. Ash, you say? Am I right in assuming this is Mab’s Ash, the darling of the Unseelie Court?”

“We have to find him!” I stood up, causing Puck and Ironhorse to blink at me. “He could be in trouble. He needs our help.” I turned to Leanansidhe. “Could you get your spies to look for him?”

“I could, dove.” Leanansidhe twiddled her cigarette lighter. “But I’m afraid I have more important things to find. We’re after the scepter, remember, darling? The prince of the Winter Court, scrumptious though he is, will have to wait.”

“Ash is fine, Princess,” Puck added, dismissing the idea immediately. “He can take care of himself.”

I sat back down, anger and worry flooding my brain. What if Ash wasn’t fine? What if he’d been captured, and they were torturing him, like they had in Machina’s realm? What if he was hurt, lying in a gutter somewhere, waiting for me? I became so worked up over Ash, I barely heard what Puck and Leanansidhe were discussing, and a small part of me didn’t care.

“What do you suggest, Lea?” This from Puck.

“Let my people search the valley. I know a sluah who is simply fabulous at finding things that don’t want to be found. I’ve sent for him today. In the meantime, I have all my minions scouring the streets, keeping their heads down and their ears to the ground. They’ll turn up something, eventually.”

“Eventually?” I glared at her. “What are we supposed to do until then?”

Leanansidhe smiled and blew me a smoke rabbit. “I suggest you get comfortable, darling.”

It wasn’t a request.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charles and the Redcaps

I hate waiting. I hate standing around with nothing to do, cooling my heels until someone gives me the go-ahead to move. I hated it while I was at the Winter Court, and I certainly didn't like it now, in Leanansidhe's mansion, waiting for complete strangers to bring word of the missing scepter. To make things worse, there were no clocks anywhere in the mansion and, even weirder, no windows to see the outside world. Also, as most faeries did, Leanansidhe hated technology, so that of course meant no television, computers, phones, video games, *anything* to make time pass more quickly. Not even a radio, although the crazy humans wandering the mansion would often spontaneously burst into song, or start playing some kind of instrument, so the house was never without noise. The few exiled fey I saw either fled my presence or nervously told me that I was not to be bothered, Leanansidhe's orders. I felt like a mouse trapped in some kind of bizarro labyrinth. Add in my constant worry for Ash, and it started to drive me as crazy as Leanansidhe's collection of gifted but insane mortals.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one going nuts.

"THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE," Ironhorse announced one day—night?—as we lounged in the library, a red-carpeted room with a stone fireplace and bookshelves that soared to the ceiling. With an impressive collection of novels and mostly fashion magazines at my fingertips, I managed to keep myself entertained during the long hours that we waited for Leanansidhe's spies to turn something up. Today, I was curled on the couch with King's *The Dark Tower* series, but it was difficult to concentrate with a restless, impatient Iron faery in the same room. Puck had vanished earlier, probably tormenting the staff or getting into some kind of trouble, and Grimalkin was with Leanansidhe, swapping favors and gossip, which left me alone with Ironhorse, who was getting on my last nerve. He was never still. Even in a human body, he acted like a flighty

racehorse, pacing the room and tossing his head so that his dreadlocks clanked against his shoulders. I noticed that even though he wore boots, he still left hoof-shaped burn marks in the carpet, before the glamour of the mansion could smooth it out again.

"PRINCESS," he said, coming around the couch to kneel in front of me, "WE MUST ACT SOON. THE SCEPTER IS GETTING FARTHER AND FARTHER AWAY, WHILE WE SIT HERE AND DO NOTHING. HOW CAN WE TRUST THIS LEANANSIDHE? WHAT IF SHE IS KEEPING US HERE BECAUSE SHE WANTS THE SCEPTER FOR HERSEL—?"

"Shh! Ironhorse, be quiet," I hissed, and he immediately fell silent, looking as contrite as his expressionless face would allow. "You can't say those things out loud. She could hear you, or her spies could rat us out. I'm pretty sure she has them watching our every move." A quick glance around the library revealed nothing, but I could still feel eyes on me, peering unseen from cracks and shadows. "She already has it in for all Iron fey. Don't add to it."

"MY APOLOGIES, PRINCESS." Ironhorse bowed his head. "I CANNOT ABIDE THIS WAITING. I FEEL AS IF I SHOULD BE DOING SOMETHING, BUT I AM USELESS TO YOU HERE."

"I know how you feel," I told him, placing a hand on his bulky arm. His skin was hot to the touch, and the tendons beneath were like solid steel. "I want to get out of here, too. But we have to be patient. Puck and Grim are out there—they'll let us know if anything turns up or if we have to leave."

He looked unhappy, but nodded. I sighed with relief and hoped Leanansidhe's spies found something soon, before Ironhorse started tearing down the walls.

The door banged open, and we both jumped, but it was only a human, the scruffy piano player we'd seen when we first came to the mansion. He ambled into the room, blank eyes scanning the floor, until they spotted me. With an empty smile, he stumbled forward, but stopped when he saw the huge Iron faery kneeling in front of me.

Ironhorse rose with a growl, but I smacked his arm, wincing as the rock-hard bicep bruised my knuckles. "It's all right," I told him when he gave me a puzzled look. "I don't think he'll hurt me. He looks pretty harmless."

Ironhorse gave the human a suspicious glare and snorted. “IF YOU NEED ME…”

“I’ll yell.”

He nodded, shot the man one last dark look, and retreated to the other side of the room to glower at us.

With Ironhorse at a distance, the man seemed to relax. He inched up to the couch and perched on the edge, staring at me curiously. I smiled at him over my book. He seemed much calmer now, not so crazy. His eyes were clear, though the way he stared at me, unblinking, was making me a bit uncomfortable.

“Hi,” I greeted, squirming a bit under that unrelenting gaze. “You’re Charles, aren’t you? I heard your playing earlier. You’re really good.”

He gave me a confused frown, tilting his head. “You heard me…play?” he murmured, his voice surprisingly clear and deep. “I don’t…remember that.”

I nodded. “In the foyer. When we first came here. You were playing for Leanansidhe and we heard the end of it.”

“I don’t remember,” he said again, scratching his head. “I don’t remember a lot of things.” He blinked and looked up at me, suddenly contemplative. “But…I remember you. Isn’t that strange?”

I glanced at Ironhorse, hovering in the corner and pretending not to listen to us. “How long have you been here, Charles?”

He frowned, scrunching his forehead. His face, though lined and worn, was curiously childlike. “I…I’ve always been here.”

“They can’t remember anything.” Grimalkin popped into existence on the back of the couch, waving his tail. I started and dropped my book, but Charles simply looked at the cat, as if he had seen far stranger. “He’s been here too long,” Grimalkin continued, sitting down and curling his tail around his legs. “That’s what being in Faery does to mortals. This one’s forgotten everything about his life before. Same as all the other mortals wandering around this place.”

“Hi, kitty,” muttered Charles, reaching a hand toward Grimalkin. Grimalkin bristled and stalked to the other end of the couch.

“How many of them are there?” I asked.

“Humans?” Grimalkin licked a paw, still keeping a wary eye on Charles. “Not so many. A dozen or so, I’d guess. All great artists—poets or painters or other such nonsense.” He sniffed and scrubbed the paw over his

face. “That’s what keeps this place alive, all that creative energy and glamour. Not even the redcaps will lay a finger on them.”

“How can she keep them here?” I asked, but Grimalkin yawned and settled down on the couch back, burying his nose in his tail and closing his eyes. Apparently, he was done answering questions. I’d poke him, but he would just swat me or disappear.

“Here you are, darlings.” Leanansidhe breezed into the room, trailing a gauzy black dress and shawl behind her. “I’m so glad I caught you before I left. Charles, darling, I must speak with my guests now. Shoo shoo.” She fluttered her hands, and with a last glance at me Charles slipped off the couch and out the door.

“You’re leaving?” I eyed her dress and purse. “Why?”

“Have you seen Puck, darling?” Leanansidhe gazed around the library, ignoring my question. “We need to have a little chitchat. Cook has been complaining that certain dinner items keep going missing, the head maid is mysteriously in love with a coatrack, and my butler has been chasing mice around the foyer all evening.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. “Anyway, darling. If you see Puck, be a dear and tell him to reverse the glamour on my poor maid, and to please stop stealing cakes from the oven before Cook has a meltdown. I shudder to think of what I might return to, but I simply cannot stay.”

“Where are you going?”

“Me? I’m off to Nashville, darling. Some brilliant young songwriter is in need of inspiration. It’s horrible to be so blocked, but not to worry. Soon, everyone will be in love with his muuuusic.” She sang the last word, and I bit my lip to kill the urge to dance. Leanansidhe went on without notice. “Also, I need to pay a visit to a night hag, see if she has any information for us. I’ll be back in a day or two, human time. Ciao, darling.”

She waggled her fingers at me and vanished in a swirl of glitter.

I blinked and fought the urge to sneeze.

“Show-off,” Puck muttered, appearing from behind one of the bookshelves, as if he’d been waiting for her to leave. He crossed the room to perch on the armrest, rolling his eyes. “She could’ve left without all the sparkly. But then, Lea always knew how to make an exit.”

“BUT SHE IS GONE.” Ironhorse hurried over, looking around as if he feared Leanansidhe was really hiding behind one of the chairs in the room,

listening to him. “SHE IS GONE, AND WE CAN FIND A WAY OUT OF HERE.”

“And do what, exactly?” Grimalkin raised his head and gave him a scornful look. “We still do not know where the scepter is. We would only be announcing our presence to the enemy and lowering our chances of finding it.”

“Furball’s right, unfortunately,” Puck sighed. “Lea’s not the easiest fey to deal with, but she’s true to her word, and she has the best chance of finding the scepter. We should stay put until we actually know where it is.”

“SO.” Ironhorse crossed his massive arms, his eyes smoldering heat and fury. “THAT IS THE PLAN FROM THE GREAT ROBIN GOODFELLOW. WE SIT HERE AND DO NOTHING.”

“And what’s your brilliant plan, Rusty? Go clomping off to the city and poke our noses into every major corporation until the scepter falls on our heads?”

“PRINCESS.” Ironhorse turned to me. “THIS IS FOOLISH. WHY WAIT HERE ANY LONGER? DON’T YOU WANT TO FIND THE SCEPTER? DON’T YOU WANT TO FIND PRINCE ASH—”

“Stop right there.” My voice dropped a few degrees, and maybe Ironhorse heard the warning in it because he quickly shut up. I stood, clenching my fists. “Don’t you dare bring Ash into this,” I hissed, making him take a step back. “Yes, I want to find him—he’s on my mind every single day. But I can’t, because we have to find the scepter first. And even if the scepter wasn’t an issue, I still couldn’t do anything about Ash because he doesn’t *want* to be found. Not by me. He made that perfectly clear last I saw him.” My throat started to close up, and I took a shaky breath to fight it. “So, the answer to your question is, yes, I want to find Ash. But I can’t. Because the damn scepter is more important. And I’m not gonna screw up just because you can’t sit still for two damn minutes.” Tears welled, and I blinked angrily, aware that all three were staring like my head was on fire. I couldn’t tell what Ironhorse was thinking behind that expressionless mask, but Grimalkin looked bored, and Puck’s face was balanced between jealousy and pity.

Which pissed me off even more.

“Meghan,” Puck began, but I spun around and stormed out before I really started bawling. He called after me, but I ignored him, swearing that if he grabbed me or got in my way he would get an earful.

“Let her go,” I heard Grimalkin say as I bashed the door open. “She would not hear you now, Goodfellow. She wants only him.”

The door swung shut behind me, and I stomped down the hall, fighting angry tears.

It wasn’t fair. I was tired of being responsible, tired of making the hard decisions because it was the right thing to do. I wanted nothing more than to find Ash and beg him to reconsider. We could be together; we could find a way to make it work if we tried hard enough, screw the consequences. And the scepter.

The hallways stretched on, each one similar to the last: narrow, dark and red. I didn’t know where I was going, and I didn’t really care. I just wanted to get away from Puck and Ironhorse, to be alone with my selfish wishes for a while. Statues, paintings and musical instruments lined the corridors; some of them vibrated softly as I passed, faint shivers of music hanging on the air.

Finally, I sank down beside a harp, ignoring a piskie that watched from the end of the hall, and buried my face in my hands.

Ash. I miss you.

My eyes stung. I swiped at them angrily, determined not to cry. The harp thrummed in my ear, sounding curious and sympathetic. Idly, I drew my finger across the strings, and it released a mournful, shivery note that echoed down the hall.

Another chord answered it, and another. I raised my head and listened as the low, faint strains of piano music drifted into the corridor. The song was dark, haunting and strangely familiar. Wiping my eyes, I stood and followed it, down the twisted hallways, past instruments that hummed and added their voices to the melody.

The song led me to pair of dark red doors with gilded handles. Beyond the wood, it sounded like a symphony was in full swing. Cautiously, I pushed the doors open and stepped into a large, circular red room.

Waves of music flowed over me. The room was full of instruments: harps and cellos and violins, along with a few guitars and even a ukulele. In the middle of the room, Charles sat hunched over the keys of a baby grand piano, eyes closed as his fingers flew over the instrument. Along the walls, the other instruments thrummed and trilled and lent their strains to the melody, turning the cacophony into something pure and wondrous. The music was a living thing, swirling around the room, dark and eerie and

haunted, bringing new tears to my eyes. I sank onto a red velvet couch and gave in to my churning emotions.

I know this song.

But try as I might, I couldn't remember from where. The memory taunted me, keeping just out of reach, a gaping hole where the image should be. But the melody, mysterious and devastatingly familiar, pulled at my insides, filling me with sadness and a gaping sense of loss.

Tears flowing freely down my skin, I watched Charles's lean shoulders rise and fall with the chords, his head so low it almost touched the keys. I couldn't be sure, but I thought his cheeks were wet, too.

When the last note died away, neither of us moved for several heartbeats. Charles sat there, his fingers resting on the final keys, breathing hard. My mind was still spinning in circles, trying to remember the tune. But the longer I sat there, trying to recall it, the farther it slipped away, vanishing into the walls and carpet, until only the instruments remembered it at all.

Charles finally pushed the seat back and rose, and I stood with him, feeling faintly guilty for eavesdropping.

"That was beautiful," I said as he turned. He blinked, obviously surprised to see me there, but he didn't startle or jump. "What was the name of the song?"

The question seemed to confuse him. He frowned and cocked his head, furrowing his brow as if trying to understand me. Then a sorrowful expression crossed his face, and he shrugged. "I don't remember."

I felt a pang of disappointment. "Oh."

"But…" He paused, running his fingers along the ivory keys, a faraway look in his eyes. "I seem to recall it was a favorite of mine. Long ago. I think." He blinked, and his eyes focused on me again. "Do you know what it's called?"

I shook my head.

"Oh. That's too bad." He sighed, pouting a bit. "The rats said you might remember."

Okay, now it was time to leave. I stood, but before I could make my escape, the door creaked open, and Warren entered the room.

"Oh, hey, Meghan." He licked his lips, eyes darting about in a nervous fashion. One hand was tucked into his jacket, hiding it from view. "I… um…I'm looking for Puck. Is he here?"

Something about him put me off. I shifted uncomfortably and crossed my arms. “No. I think he’s in the library with Ironhorse.”

“Good.” He stepped in farther, pulling his hand out of his jacket. The lights gleamed along the black barrel of a gun as he raised the muzzle and pointed it at me. I went stiff with shock, and Warren glanced over his shoulder. “Okay,” he called, “coast is clear.”

The door swung open, and a half-dozen redcaps poured into the room behind him. The one with the fishhook in his nose, Razor Dan, stepped forward and leered at me with a mouthful of jagged teeth.

“You sure this is the one, half-breed?”

Warren smirked. “I’m sure,” he replied, never taking the gun, or his eyes, off me. “The Iron King will reward us handsomely for this, you have my word.”

“Bastard,” I hissed at Warren, making the redcaps snicker. “Traitor. Why are you doing this? Leanansidhe gives you everything.”

“Oh, come on.” Warren sneered and shook his head. “You act like it’s a total shock that I want something better than this.” He gestured around the foyer with his free hand. “Being a minion in Leanansidhe’s sorry refugee cult hasn’t exactly been my life goal, Princess. So I’m a little bitter, yeah. But the new Iron King is offering half-breeds and exiles part of the Nevernever and a chance to kick the pure-blooded asses of all the dicks who stomped on us if we just do him a teensy favor and find you. And you were nice enough to drop into my lap.”

“You’ll never get away with it,” I told him desperately. “Puck and Ironhorse will come looking for me. And Leanansidhe—”

“By the time Leanansidhe gets back, we’ll be long gone,” Warren interrupted. “And the rest of Dan’s crew is taking care of Goodfellow and the iron monster, so they’re a little busy at the moment. I’m afraid that no one is coming to your rescue, Princess.”

“Warren,” snapped Razor Dan with an impatient glare. “We don’t have time to gloat, you idiot. Shoot the crazy and let’s get out of here before Leanansidhe comes back.”

My stomach clenched tight. Warren rolled his eyes, swinging the barrel of the gun around to Charles. Charles stiffened, seeming to grasp what was happening as Warren gave him a crooked leer.

“Sorry, Charles,” he muttered, and the gun filled my vision, cold, black and steely. I saw the opening of the barrel like Edgebriar’s iron ring, and

felt a buzzing beneath my skin. “It’s nothing personal. You just got in the way.”

Tighten, I thought at the pistol barrel, just as Warren pulled the trigger.

A roar shattered the air as the gun exploded in Warren’s hand, sending the half-satyr stumbling back. Screaming, he dropped the mangled remains of the weapon and clutched his hand to his chest as the smell of smoke and burning flesh filled the room.

The redcaps stared wide-eyed at Warren as he collapsed to his knees, wailing and shaking his charred hand. “What are you waiting for?” he screamed at them, his voice half shout and half sob. “Kill the crazy and get the girl!”

The redcap closest to me snarled and lunged. I shrank back, but Charles suddenly stepped between us. Before the redcap could dodge, he grabbed a cello off the wall and smashed it down over its head. The instrument let out a shriek, as if in pain, and the redcap crumpled the floor.

Razor Dan sighed.

“All right, lads,” he growled, as I grabbed Charles’s hand and pulled him back behind the piano. “All together now. Get them!”

“PRINCESS!”

Behind them, the door burst open with a furious roar, and two redcaps were hurled through the air, landing face-first into the wall. The pack spun around, their eyes going wide as Ironhorse barreled into them, swinging his huge fists and bellowing at the top of his lungs. Several redcaps went flying and the rest swarmed him with bloodthirsty cries, biting at his arms and legs. They fell back, shrieking in pain, teeth shattered, mouths blackened and raw. Ironhorse continued to hurl them away like he’d gone berserk.

“Hey, Princess.” Puck appeared beside me, grinning from ear to ear. “Grimalkin said you were having redcap trouble. We’re here to help, although I must say Rusty is doing fine on his own.” He ducked as a redcap flew overhead, landing with a crunch against the wall. “I’ll have to remember to keep him around. He’d be great fun at parties, don’t you think?”

The redcap Ironhorse had thrown into the wall staggered to his feet, looking dazed. Seeing us, he bared a mouthful of broken teeth and tensed to lunge. Puck grinned and pulled out his dagger, but there was an explosion of light between them, and a ringing voice filled the hallway.

“Everyone freeze!”

We froze.

“Well,” Leanansidhe said, striding over to me and Puck. “Turns out this game was a rousing success. Although, I must say, I was hoping to be surprised. It gets rather boring when you’re right about everything.”

“L-Leanansidhe,” Razor Dan stammered, all the blood draining from his face as she regarded him with her fearsome smile. “H-how…? You’re supposed to be in Nashville.”

“Dan, darling.” Leanansidhe shook her head and *tsked.* “Did you really think I was blind to what was going on? In my own house? I know the rumors circulating the streets, pet. I know the Iron King has been offering rewards for the girl. I had the feeling there was a traitor in my house, a so-called agent of the Iron King. What better way to flush him out than to leave him alone with the princess and wait for him to make his move? Your kind is so very predictable, darling.”

“We…” Dan glanced around at his crew, clearly looking for someone else to blame. “This wasn’t our idea, Leanansidhe.”

“Oh, I know, darling. You’re too dull to organize something like this. Which is why I’m not going to punish you.”

“Really?” Dan relaxed a bit.

“Really?” I blurted, looking up at her. “But they attacked me! And they were going to kill Charles! You’re not going to do anything about that?”

“They were only following their base instincts, pet.” Leanansidhe smiled at me. “I expected nothing less of them. What I really want is the mastermind. Why don’t you stick around…*Warren.*”

We all turned to where Warren was trying to sneak down the corridor without being seen. He froze, wincing at the sound of his name, and gave Leanansidhe a feeble smile.

“Leanansidhe, I…I can explain.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can, darling.” Leanansidhe’s voice made my stomach curl. “And you will. We’re going to have a little chitchat, and you’re going to tell me everything you know about the Iron King and the scepter. You’re going to sing, darling. Sing as you’ve never sung before, I promise.”

“Come on,” Puck told me, taking my elbow. “You don’t want to hear this, Princess, trust me. Lea will give us the information when she has it.”

“Charles,” I said, and he turned from Leanansidhe to me, his eyes blank and empty once more. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“Pretty lady’s sparkly,” Charles muttered. I sighed.

“Yeah,” I said sadly, taking his hand. “She is.”

With Ironhorse glowering and Puck leading the way, we fled the music room and Leanansidhe’s presence, leaving Warren to his fate.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Royal Treatment

“A software corporation?” Puck repeated, brow furrowing. “Really. That’s where they’ve been hiding it all this time?”

“Apparently, darling.” Leanansidhe leaned back in her chair, crossing her long legs. “Remember, the Iron fey aren’t like us. They’re not going to be hanging around parks and museums, singing to flowers. They like high-tech places that attract the cold, calculating mortals we care so little for.”

I shared a glance with Puck. We’d been talking about that strange, cold glamour I’d used on the gun before Leanansidhe came in. Though we were only guessing, we’d both come to the conclusion that it had indeed been iron glamour that I’d used on Warren, and that Leanansidhe, with her obvious hate and contempt for the Iron fey, definitely should not know about it yet.

I wished *I* knew more about it. I had the feeling this had never happened in the faery world before, that I was a first, and there was no expert to talk to. Why did I have iron glamour? Why could I use it sometimes and not others? Too many questions, and no answers. I sighed and decided to focus on the problem at hand, instead of the one I had no hope of unraveling yet.

“What’s the name of this place?” I asked Leanansidhe, not pointing out that I was one of those cold, calculating mortals who liked gadgets and computers and high-tech. I still missed my poor drowned iPod, the victim of a river crossing the first time I came to Faery, and this was the longest I’d ever gone without television. If I ever got back to having a normal life, I’d have a lot to catch up on.

Leanansidhe tapped her fingers against the armrest, pursing her lips in thought. “Oh, what did they call it? They all sound the same to me, darling.” She snapped her fingers. “SciCorp, I believe it was. Yes, in downtown San Jose. The heart of Silicon Valley.”

“Big place,” I muttered. “I don’t think we can just walk in. There’s sure to be cameras and security guards and everything.”

“Yes, a frontal assault is doomed to fail,” Leanansidhe agreed, glancing at Ironhorse, who stood in the corner with his arms crossed. “And remember, it’s not only mortals you have to worry about. There’s sure to be Iron fey as well. You’re going to have to be…sneakier.”

In the corner, Ironhorse raised his head. “WHAT ABOUT A DISTRACTION?” he offered. “I COULD KEEP THEIR ATTENTION ON ME, WHILE SOMEONE GOES IN THROUGH THE BACK.”

“Or I could glamour Meghan invisible,” Puck added.

Grimalkin yawned from where he lay the couch. “It will be risky holding a glamour with all the iron and steel inside,” he said, blinking sleepily. “And we all know how horribly incompetent the human is when it comes to magic, even without her glamour sealed off.”

I threw a pillow at him. He gave me a disdainful look and went back to sleep.

“Do we know anything about the building?” I asked Leanansidhe. “Blueprints, security, that kind of thing?” I suddenly felt like a spy in an action movie. The image of me dangling over a net of trip wires, *Mission Impossible* style, sprang to mind, and I bit down a nervous giggle.

“Unfortunately, Warren didn’t have much to say about the building, though he really wanted to at the end, poor boy.” Leanansidhe smiled, as if reliving a fond memory, and I shivered. “Thankfully, my spies found out all we needed to know. They said they’re holding the scepter on floor twenty-nine point five.”

“Twenty-nine point five?” I frowned. “How’s that work?”

“I’ve no idea, darling. That’s just what they said. However—” and she produced a slip of paper with a flourish “—they were able to come up with this. Apparently, it’s some sort of code, used to get into the Iron faeries’ lair. They couldn’t solve it, but perhaps you will have better luck. I’ve no head for numbers at all, I’m afraid.”

She handed the paper to me. Puck and Ironhorse crowded around, and we stared at it for several moments. Leanansidhe was right—it was definitely part of a code.

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“Okay,” I mused, after several moments of racking my brain and not coming up with anything. “So, we just have to figure this out and then we’re home free. Doesn’t sound too hard.”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated, darling.” Leanansidhe accepted a glass of wine from a brownie. “As you said before, SciCorp is not a place you can just walk into. Visitors are not allowed past the front desk, and security is fairly tight. You have to be an employee to get off the first floor.”

“Well, what if we pretended to be the janitor or cleaning service, or something like that?”

Grimalkin snorted and shifted position on the couch. “Would you not need an ID card for that?” he said, settling comfortably on the pillow I’d thrown at him. “If the building is so well guarded, I doubt they let in common riffraff off the street.”

I slumped, frowning. “He’s right. We would need a fake ID, or the ID of one of the workers, to make it inside. I don’t know anyone who can get us something like that.”

Leanansidhe smiled. “I do,” she said, and snapped her fingers twice. “Skrae, darling,” she called, “would you come here a moment? I need you to find something.”

A piskie spiraled into view, gossamer wings buzzing. Three inches tall, he had indigo skin and dandelion hair, and wore nothing but a razor-toothed grin as he fluttered by. His eyes, enormous white orbs in his pointed face, regarded me curiously, until Leanansidhe clapped her hands.

“Skrae, pet, I’m over here. Focus, darling.” The piskie gave me a wink and a suggestive hip wiggle before turning his attention to Leanansidhe. “Good. Now, pay attention. I have a mission for you. I want you to find the streetrats. The half-phouka and the troll boy, I forget their names. Tell

them to leave off the eggs for now, I have another job for them. Now go, darling. Buzz buzz." She fluttered her hand, and the piskie zipped away out of sight.

"Kimi and Nelson," I said softly.

"What, darling?"

"That's their names. Kimi and Nelson. They were with…with Warren, when we first met." I remembered Kimi's impish grin, Nelson's stoic expression. "You don't think they're involved with the Iron fey, too?"

"No." Leanansidhe leaned back, snapping at a brownie for wine. "They knew nothing of Warren's betrayal or plot to kidnap you. He made that very clear."

"Oh. That's a relief."

"Although," Leanansidhe mused with a faraway look, "the girl would make a lovely violin. Or maybe a lyre. The troll is more of a bass, I believe. What do you think, darling?"

I shuddered and hoped she was kidding.

* * *

KIMI AND NELSON showed up a few hours later. When they walked into the foyer, Leanansidhe wasted no time in telling them what had happened to Warren, which left them shocked and angry but not disbelieving. No tears were shed, no furious accusations were hurled at anyone. Kimi sniffled a bit, but when Leanansidhe informed them they had a job, both perked up instantly. They struck me as very pragmatic kids, used to the school of hard knocks, which left little room for self-pity or wallowing.

"So," Kimi said, flopping back on the sofa, which almost swallowed her whole, "what do you want us to do?"

Leanansidhe smiled and gestured for me to take over. "This is your plan, dove. You tell them what you need."

"Um…right." The two half-breeds looked at me expectantly. I swallowed. "Um, well, have you heard of a company called SciCorp?"

Kimi nodded, kicking her feet. "Sure. Big corporation that makes software, or something like that. Why?"

I looked at Leanansidhe, and she waved her cigarette at me encouragingly. "Well, we need to get inside the building and steal something. Unnoticed."

Kimi's eyes widened. "You serious?"

I nodded. "Yes. But, we need your help to get past the guards and the security. Specifically, we need an ID card from one of the workers, and Leanansidhe said you might be able to get us one. Could you do that?"

Kimi and Nelson shared a glance, and the half-phouka turned to me with a mischievous smile. "No problem." Her eyes gleamed, relishing the encounter. "When do you want it?"

"As soon as possible."

"Right, then." Kimi squirmed off the couch and tapped Nelson's huge bicep. "Come on, big guy. Let's go terrorize a human. Back before you know it."

As the two left the foyer, Puck glanced at Leanansidhe. "You sure those two can handle it?" he asked, and grinned mischievously. "Want me to help them out?"

"No, darling. It's best that you do not." Leanansidhe stood, green smoke swirling about her. "Half-breeds have it easier in Silicon Valley—they won't attract as much attention as normal fey, and they haven't our allergies to all the iron and steel. Those two will be fine, trust me. Now, then." She walked toward me, smiling. "Come with me, my pet. We have a big day ahead of us."

I stared at her nervously. "Where are we going?"

"Shopping, darling!"

"What? Now? Why?"

Leanansidhe *tsked.* "Darling, you can't expect to waltz into SciCorp looking like *that.*" She regarded my jeans and sweater imperiously, and sniffed. "It doesn't exactly scream 'I'm a business professional.' More like, 'I'm a Goodwill junkie.' If we're going to get you into SciCorp, you'll need more than luck and glamour. You'll need an entire makeover."

"But we're running out of time. Why can't Puck just glamour me some clothes—"

"Darling, darling, darling." Leanansidhe waved her hand. "You *never* turn down a chance to go shopping, pet. Besides, didn't you hear Grimalkin? Even the most powerful glamour has the tendency to unravel if surrounded by steel and iron. We don't want you to *look* like a corporate worker, dove, we want you to *be* a corporate worker. And we're going shopping, no buts about it." She gave me an indulgent smile I didn't like at

all. “Think of me as your temporary faery godmother, darling. Just let me get my magic wand.”

* * *

I FOLLOWED Leanansidhe down another long corridor that dumped us out onto a sunny sidewalk bustling with people, who didn’t notice our sudden appearance from a previously empty alleyway. Even though the sun was shining and the sky was clear, there was a frigid bite to the air, and people hurried down the street in thick sweaters and coats, a sign that winter was on its way or had already arrived. As we passed a newspaper machine, I quickly scanned the date in the corner and breathed in a sigh of relief. Five months. I’d been stuck in Faery five months; a long time to be sure, but better than five years, or five centuries. At least my parents were still alive.

I spent the rest of the afternoon being dragged from shop to shop, following Leanansidhe as she plucked clothes from racks and shoved them at me, demanding I try them on. When I balked at the ungodly prices, she laughed and reminded me that she was my temporary faery godmother today, and that price was not an issue.

I tried on women’s suits first, sleek jackets and tight, knee-length skirts that made me look five years older, at least to Leanansidhe’s reckoning. I must’ve tried on two dozen different styles, colors and combinations before Leanansidhe finally announced that she liked a simple black outfit that looked like every other black outfit I had tried on.

“So, we’re done now?” I ventured hopefully, as Leanansidhe had the store clerk take the suit away to be wrapped. The faery looked down at me in genuine surprise and laughed.

“Oh, no, darling. That was just a suit. You still need shoes, makeup, a purse, a few accessories…no pet, we’ve only just begun.”

“I didn’t think faeries liked shopping and buying stuff. Isn’t that a bit…unnatural?”

“Of course not, darling. Shopping is just another form of hunting. *All* fey are hunters, whether they admit it or not. It’s in our nature, pet, nothing unnatural about it.”

That made a strange sort of sense.

* * *

MORE STORES. I lost track of all the places we visited, the aisles we stalked, the racks we pored over. Leanansidhe was a faery on a mission; the second she swept through the doors, all sales-people would drop what they were doing and flock to her side, asking if they could help, if they could be of service. I was invisible beside her; even when Leanansidhe announced we were shopping for *me*, the clerks would forget I existed the second they turned away. Still, they were eager to please, bringing out their best shoes in my size, showing us a staggering variety of purses I would never use, and suggesting earrings that would accent the color of my eyes. (This was also the time Leanansidhe discovered I didn't pierce my ears. Thirty minutes later, I sat with my earlobes throbbing as a bubbly clerk pressed cotton to my ears and cheerfully told me the swelling would go down in a day or two.)

Finally, as the sun was setting over the buildings, the Queen of Shopping decided we were finished. Relieved that the long day was over, I sat on a chair, staring at the stupid code, annoyed that I still couldn't solve it. I watched Leanansidhe chat up the clerk as she wrapped and bagged the merchandise. When she announced the grand total, I nearly fell out of my seat, but Leanansidhe smiled and handed her a credit card without blinking once. For just a moment, when the clerk handed it back, the card looked more like a piece of bark, but Leanansidhe dropped it into her purse before I could get a closer look.

"Well," my temporary faery godmother said brightly as we departed the store, "we have your clothes, your shoes, and your accessories. Now, the real fun begins."

"What?" I asked wearily.

"Your hair, my dove. It's just…not good." Leanansidhe made as if to pluck my bangs, but couldn't quite bring herself to touch them. "And your nails. They need help. Fortunately, it's almost time for the spa to open."

"Spa?" I looked at the glowing orange ball disappearing over the horizon, wishing we could go home. "But it must be six o'clock. Aren't most places like that closed?"

"Of course, darling. That's when all the humans leave. Don't ask such silly questions." Leanansidhe shook her head at my naïveté. "Come now. I know Ben will be dying to meet you."

Natural Earth Salon and Spa was crowded tonight. We passed a pair of giggling sylphs on the pebbled path to the salon. Petite and delicate, their razor-edged wings buzzing softly, they grinned at us as we walked by, teeth glinting like knives. A Winter sidhe, tall and cold and beautiful, brushed by us as we stepped through the door into the waiting area, leaving a trail of frost on my skin and a chill in my lungs. A trio of piskies landed in my hair, laughing and tugging, until Leanansidhe gave them a look and they buzzed out the door.

Inside, the lighting was dim, the walls hewn of natural stone, giving it a cavelike feel. A marble fountain with fish and mermaids bubbled in the center of the foyer, filling the room with the cheerful sound of running water. Orchids and bamboo flourished in natural planters, and the air was warm and damp.

"Why are there so many fey here?" I asked softly, as a huge black dog loped across the doorway in the back. "Is this a place for exiles? A salon and spa? That's kind of weird."

"Can't you feel it, dove? The glamour of this place?" Leanansidhe leaned down, gesturing to the walls and fountain. "Some places in the mortal world are more magical than others, hot spots for glamour, if you will. It draws us like a moth to a flame—exiles, solitary and court fey alike. Besides, darling—" Leanansidhe straightened with a sniff. "Even our kind appreciates a bit of pampering now and then."

A blond, well-dressed satyr welcomed Leanansidhe with a kiss on both cheeks, before turning to me with a dazzling smile.

"Ah, so this is the princess I've heard so much about," he gushed, taking my hand to press it to his lips. "She's absolutely adorable. But—" and he glanced at Leanansidhe "—I can see what you mean about her hair. And her *nails*." He shuddered and shook his head before I could say anything. "Well, leave it to me. We'll have her looking fabulous in no time."

"Work your magic, Ben," Leanansidhe said, wandering away toward a back door. "I'll be with Miguel if you need me, darling. Meghan dear, just do what Ben says and you'll be fine." She waved her hand airily as she sauntered through the door, and was gone.

Ben turned to me and clasped his furry hands. "Well, sweet-cakes, you're in luck. We have the rest of the evening booked for you."

“Really?” I couldn’t help sounding dubious. I had never been to one of these places before, let alone one run completely by the fey, and didn’t know what to expect. “How long can it take to do hair?”

Ben laughed. “Oh, sweet pea, you’re killing me. Come, now. We’ve got a lot to do.”

* * *

THE NEXT FEW HOURS flew by in a confused blur. The fey staff, mostly satyrs and a few brownies, were alarmingly attentive. They took my clothes away and wrapped me in a very white bathrobe. I was made to lie on my back while brownies in white suits slathered cream on my face and put cucumbers over my eyes, telling me to lie still. After maybe an hour of this, they sat me up, and a cute satyr named Miroku soaked my hands in a warm bath that smelled like cocoa and coffee beans. He massaged my hands with lotion before meticulously filing, polishing, and painting my nails. Then the whole procedure was done to my feet. After that, they whisked me away to the stylist, who shampooed, trimmed and styled my hair—with bronze scissors, I noted—chatting at me all the while. It was odd. I won’t say I didn’t enjoy all the attention and pampering, but I did feel a bit dazed through the whole process, and a little out of place. This wasn’t me. I wasn’t a princess or a superstar or anything special. I was a poor pig-farmer girl from Louisiana, and I didn’t belong here.

They were adding the final touches of makeup to my eyes and lips when Leanansidhe sauntered back into the room, looking so smug and relaxed that her skin glowed. She had dropped her more human glamour, and her ethereal beauty filled the room, red-gold hair nearly blinding under the artificial lights. Ben trailed behind her, gushing about how radiant she looked.

“Mmm yes, I swear that Miguel is a virtual musician with his fingers,” Leanansidhe murmured with a catlike stretch, raising too-slender arms over her head. “If you didn’t need him so badly, love, I’d kidnap him myself and take him home. That kind of talent is hard to find, believe me. Well now,” she exclaimed when she saw me. “Look at you, darling. You’re a completely different person. I barely recognize you.”

“Isn’t she cute?” Ben added, beaming at me. “Don’t you love what they did with her hair? I adore the highlights, and Patricia does layering so

well.”

“It’s perfect,” Leanansidhe nodded, studying me with a half smile that made me very uncomfortable. “If I don’t recognize her, no one in SciCorp will, either.”

I wanted to say something, but at that moment, a strange odor cut through the smell of perfume, makeup and moisturizers, stopping me mid-breath. Leanansidhe and Ben stiffened, as did every faery in the room. A couple brownies went scurrying away in terror, and the faery patrons began to murmur and shift restlessly as the foreign smell grew stronger. I recognized it, and my heart sped up, beating against my ribs. Metal. There was an Iron faery on the premises.

And then, it walked through the door.

My stomach turned over, and some of the patrons gasped. The Iron faery was dressed in a dove-gray business suit, and an expressive-looking one at that. Short black hair didn’t conceal the long pointed ears, or the Bluetooth phone near his jaw. His skin, green as circuit board, glinted with hundreds of blinking lights, wires and computer chips. Behind thick, wire-rimmed glasses, his eyes shimmered green, blue and red.

Smooth as glass, Ben sidled in front of me, blocking my view but also shielding me from the faery’s gaze. I froze and tried to be as invisible as possible.

“Well.” The Iron faery’s voice, thick with mockery, cut through the room. “Isn’t anyone going to invite me in? Give me a pamphlet? Tell me your services? For such a high-ranking business, the customer service leaves much to be desired.”

For a moment, nobody moved. Then one of the satyrs edged forward, shaking but furious at the same time. “We don’t serve your kind here.”

“Really?” The faery put a hand to his chest, feigning astonishment. “Well, I must say, I’m rather embarrassed. Then again, I could probably kill you all without even thinking about it, so I suppose a little prejudice is acceptable.”

Leanansidhe stepped forward, her hair coiling behind her like snakes. “What do you want, abomination?”

“Leanansidhe.” The Iron faery smiled. “You are Leanansidhe, aren’t you? We’ve heard of you, you and your little network of spies. Word is, you know the location of Oberon’s daughter, the Summer princess.”

“I know a lot, darling.” Leanansidhe sounded utterly bored and disinterested. “It’s my business to be informed, for my own amusement and safety. I don’t make a habit of involving myself. Nor do I make a habit of conversing with iron abominations. So, if we’re quite done here, I think you should leave.”

“Oh, I’ll be gone soon enough.” The Iron faery didn’t seem the least bit perturbed. “But, my boss has a message for you, and an offer. Give us the location of Oberon’s daughter, and all your crimes will be abolished when we take the Nevernever. You can go home. Don’t you want to go home, Leanansidhe?” He raised his voice, addressing the rest of the assembled fey. “And that goes for every half-breed and exile, pure-blooded or not. Help us find the Summer princess, and your place in the Nevernever will be assured. The Iron King welcomes all who want to serve him.”

He paused after this announcement, waiting for someone to step forward. No one moved. Probably because Leanansidhe, standing in the middle of the room, was throwing off some seriously scary vibes, flickering the lamps with her power. Which was a good thing, because everyone was looking at her and not me.

The Iron faery waited a moment longer, and when no one volunteered to piss off the Queen of the Exiles, he stepped back with a smile. “Well. If anyone changes his mind, just call us. We’re everywhere. And we will come for you, in the end.”

He spun on a heel and left, footsteps clicking over the tile. Everyone watched him go. Leanansidhe glowered at the door until the last traces of iron faded away, then spun on me.

“Party’s over, darling. Let’s go. Ben, you’re a doll and your assistance today is much appreciated, but we really must dash.”

“Of course, girl.” Ben waved to us as we hurried out. “You bring that cutie back to see me soon, okay? And good luck infiltrating the megacorporation!”

* * *

WHEN WE RETURNED to the mansion, we found Puck and Ironhorse discussing strategy with Kimi and Nelson, who had returned from their mission. All four were huddled around the library table, heads bent close together, muttering in low voices. When we came in, followed by several

redcaps carrying our bags, they straightened quickly, and their eyes went wide. Even Ironhorse's glowing eyes got big and round when we swept through the door.

"Wow, Meghan!" Kimi bounced in place, clapping her hands. "You look awesome! I love what you did with your hair."

"PRINCESS." Ironhorse looked me up and down, nodding in approval. "TRULY, YOU ARE A VISION."

I glanced at Puck, who was staring at me in a daze. "Um…" he stammered, while I nearly went into shock with the novelty of actually rendering Puck speechless. "You look…nice," he muttered at last.

I blushed, suddenly self-conscious.

"Children." Leanansidhe clapped her hands, bringing our attention back to her. "If we are going to retrieve the scepter, we need to move quickly. You, streetrats." She snapped her fingers at Kimi and Nelson. "Did you get what I sent you for, darlings?"

Kimi nodded at Nelson, who dug in his pocket and held up a plastic ID card. The face of a bespectacled blond woman glared out from the right corner, lips pursed as if trying to kill the camera with a look. Nelson tossed the card to Leanansidhe, who studied it disdainfully.

"Rosalyn Smith. A bit old, but she'll have to do. Well, then." She turned to the rest of us. "Tomorrow is a big day, darlings. Don't stay up too late. I'll meet you in the foyer tomorrow morning. Meghan, dove, you really need to figure out that code before tomorrow. Operation Scepter begins at dawn. Ta!" She gestured dramatically and vanished in a swirl of glitter.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, I was too nervous to sleep. I lay on my bed, Grimalkin dozing beside me on the pillow, trying to figure out the code but really just staring at the numbers until my eyes glazed over. I kept visualizing everything that could go wrong during the mission, which was a rather lengthy list. In a few hours, we were going to sneak into SciCorp using some woman's badge, grab the scepter, and book out before anyone realized we were there. As if it would be that easy, like a walk on the beach. As if they wouldn't have the scepter guarded day and night.

There was a soft rap on my door, and Puck peeked his head inside.

“Hey, Princess. Thought you could use something to eat. Mind if I come in?”

I shook my head, and Puck entered with a plate bearing sandwiches and apple slices. “Here,” he announced, setting it down on the bed. “You should eat something. I tried making something better, but Cook chased me out of the kitchen with a rolling pin. I don’t think she’s very fond of me.” He snickered and fell across the bed, helping himself to an apple slice as he got comfortable.

“Appreciate it,” I murmured, picking up a sandwich. Cheese and… more cheese; better than nothing, I guessed. “Where’s Ironhorse?”

“Off with the two streetrats, discussing strategy,” Puck replied, stuffing the whole apple wedge into his mouth. “You should hear them—they think they’re in a James Bond movie or something.” He noticed me fiddling with a corner of the paper square and sat up. “How’s it going, Princess?”

I crumpled the paper into a wad and threw it across the room. Puck blinked. “Um, not well, I assume?”

“I don’t get it,” I sighed, drawing my hand across my eyes. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to make heads or tails of it—addition, multiplying the lines, division—and I still don’t get it. And if I can’t decrypt the stupid code, we won’t get up to the right floor, which means we won’t get the scepter, which means everyone will die because of me!”

“Hey.” Puck sat up and put an arm around me. “Why are you freaking out? This is nothing, Princess. This should be cake for you. You’re the one who took down the Iron King. You marched into the heart of enemy territory and kicked ass. This isn’t any different.”

“Yes, it is!” I put my sandwich down and stared at him. “This is worlds apart! Puck, when I faced Machina, it was to rescue Ethan, just Ethan. I’m not saying he wasn’t important—I would’ve died to save him in a heartbeat. But it was only one person.” I closed my eyes and leaned into Puck’s chest, listening to his heartbeat for a few seconds. “If I screw this up,” I muttered, “if I don’t get the scepter back, *everyone* will die. Not just you and Ironhorse and the others, but everyone. Faery will be wiped out. No Summer, no Winter, nothing. Nothing but the Iron fey will be left. Now do you see why I’m a little jumpy?”

I didn’t mention that I wished Ash was here. That he was the main reason I’d been brave in the Iron Kingdom. I missed him, his calm,

unflinching determination, his quiet self-confidence.

Puck shifted so that he was facing me, tilting my chin to look at me square. I met his eyes and saw a hundred churning emotions in his emerald gaze.

“I’m here,” he murmured, running long fingers through my hair. “Don’t forget that. No matter what happens, I’ll protect you.” He leaned in, resting his forehead to mine. I smelled apples on his breath, saw my own reflection in his eyes. “I’ll never leave your side, no matter what comes at us. Count on it.”

My heart thumped in my ears. I knew I was standing on the edge of a vast precipice, looking down. I knew I should pull away, that if I stayed here, a line would be crossed, and we could never go back.

I closed my eyes instead. And Puck kissed me.

His lips were hesitant at first, brushing lightly against mine, giving me room to pull away. When I pressed into him, he cupped the back of my head and kissed me in earnest. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close, wanting to forget everything that was happening, to drown myself in feeling. Maybe now the gaping hurt and loneliness would go away for a little while. Puck shoved the plate off the bed and leaned back, pulling me down with him, his lips suddenly at my neck, tracing a line of fire down my skin.

“If you are going to do that, would you mind not jostling the bed so much?” came a sarcastic voice near the headboard. “Perhaps you could roll around on the floor.”

Blushing furiously, I looked up. Grimalkin lay on the pillow, watching us with a bemused, half-lidded stare. Puck followed my gaze and let out an explosive sigh.

“Did I ever mention how much I hate cats?”

“Do not blame me, Goodfellow.” Grimalkin blinked, managing to sound bored and indignant at the same time. “I was minding my own business long before you and the princess started humping like rabbits.”

Puck snorted. Rolling to his stomach, he pushed himself off the bed and pulled me up with him, wrapping me in his arms. My face flamed, but whether it was from Grimalkin’s ill-timed comments or something else, I couldn’t tell.

“I’d better go,” Puck sighed, sounding reluctant. “I told Ironhorse I’d look at some blueprints Kimi managed to swipe from somewhere.” His

gaze strayed to the scattered food on the floor, sandwiches and apple slices everywhere, and he bit down a sheepish grin. “Erm, sorry about the mess, Princess. And don’t worry about the code, we’ll figure something out. Try to get some sleep, okay? We’ll be right outside.”

He bent down, as if to kiss me, but I couldn’t meet his eyes and looked away. He paused, then placed a light kiss on my forehead and left, shutting the door behind him.

I collapsed to the bed, burying my face in a pillow. What had I done? I kissed Puck, because he was there. Because I was scared and lonely for someone else. Puck loved me, and I had kissed him for all the wrong reasons. I’d kissed him thinking of Ash. And…I liked it.

Guilt gnawed at me. I missed Ash, and the longing was ripping my stomach to pieces, but I also wanted Puck to come back and kiss me some more.

“I am so screwed up,” I muttered, flopping back on the bed. The cracks in the ceiling smirked at me, and I groaned. “What am I going to do?”

“Hopefully obsess in silence so I can get to sleep,” Grimalkin said without opening his eyes. He flexed his claws, yawned, and burrowed deeper into the pillow. “Perhaps you can work on deciphering the code so that we can retrieve the scepter. I would hate to put in all this work for nothing.”

I glared at him, but he was right. And, maybe it would take my mind off Puck for a while. “I mean, it’s not like I’m cheating on Ash or anything,” I reasoned, retrieving the crumpled ball of paper and climbing back onto the bed. “He was the one who dumped me and said to forget about him. We’re over. Actually, I’m not sure we had anything in the first place.”

Grimalkin didn’t answer. I stared at the code and sighed again, heavily, as the numbers seemed to crawl across the paper like ants. “I’m never going to get this, Grim,” I muttered. “This is hopeless. You’d have to be a mathematical genius or something.”

Grimalkin thumped his tail and shifted around so that his back was to me. “Try looking at the code as a riddle, instead of a mathematical equation,” he muttered. “Perhaps you are trying too hard to fit it to a formula. The Iron fey are still fey, after all, and riddles are in our blood.”

A riddle, huh? I looked down at the paper again and frowned. I still couldn’t make heads or tails of the stupid code, no matter how much I

looked at it.

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132113
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“Grim, I don’t—”

“Read it out loud, human.” Grim sounded annoyed but resigned, as if he knew he wasn’t going to get any sleep until he helped me. “If you must make noise, at least try to be useful.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “But it’s not going to help.” Grim didn’t reply, so I started reading it from the top. “Three. One-three. One-one-one-three. Three-one-one-three.” I stopped, frowning. It sounded different, reading it out loud. I tried the third line again. “One-one, one-three.”

One 1. One 3.

I blinked. Could it really be that simple? I ran through the rest of the lines, just to be sure, and my eyes widened as it all clicked into place. “I… I got it! I think. Wait a minute.” I scanned the paper again. “Yes, that’s right! It’s not just a number riddle, it’s a language riddle, too! You were right, Grim! Look!” I shoved the paper at Grimalkin, who continued to ignore me, but I went on anyway. “Each of the lines describes the line before it. The first number is a three, so the second line goes, One 3. The next line is One 1, One 3, and so on. So, if that’s the case, the last line of the riddle, and the answer to the code would have to be…” I counted the numbers in my head. “1-1-1-3-1-2-2-1-1-3.” I felt a thrill of pride and excitement, somehow knowing I was right, and couldn’t help the huge grin spreading over my face. “I figured it out, Grim! We can get the scepter after all.”

Grimalkin didn’t answer. His eyes were closed, and I couldn’t tell if he was asleep or faking it. I considered tracking down Puck and Ironhorse to share in my victory, but on reflection I wasn’t sure I wanted to face Puck

just then. So I lay on the bed, listening to the brownies scurry back and forth, cleaning up apple slices, while my mind replayed Puck's kiss until the memory was seared into my brain. Guilt and excitement assaulted me by turns. One moment, I was ready to drag Puck back here to finish what we'd started, the next, I missed Ash so much my chest hurt. I stayed awake, too hyped up to sleep, until a brownie poked his head in to tell me it was dawn and Leanansidhe was waiting for me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Operation Scepter

The woman stared at me over the gold rim of her glasses, lips pursed in a disdainful expression. She wore a black business suit that clung to her body, and her hair was pulled into a tight yet elegant bun, giving her a stern demeanor. Her makeup was perfect, and the towering black heels made her seem taller and even more imposing.

"What do you think, darling?" Leanansidhe asked, sounding pleased. "The glasses might be a bit much, but we don't want to take any chances today."

I stuck out my tongue at the woman, who did the same in the mirror's reflection. "It's perfect," I said, amazed. "I don't even recognize myself. I look like a lawyer or something."

"Hopefully enough to get you into SciCorp this afternoon," Leanansidhe murmured, and all the dread and fear I'd managed to suppress all morning rose up like a black tide. I swallowed hard to keep the nausea down, wishing I hadn't eaten that box of powdered doughnuts Kimi brought in for breakfast. I wouldn't look very professional if I puked all over my expensive shoes.

Puck, Kimi, Nelson and Ironhorse were in the foyer, huddled around a blueprint when we came in, me wobbling behind Leanansidhe in my flimsy heels. Grimalkin dozed on the top of the piano, his tail brushing the keys, ignoring us all. I saw Leanansidhe glance his way and wince, as if imagining scratch marks on the polished wood.

Puck glanced up at me and smiled. He held out a hand, and I tottered up to him, grabbing his arm for support. My toes throbbed, and I leaned into him, trying to take the weight off my feet. How did women do it, walking around in these things every day without snapping their ankles?

"How's that walking thing coming?" Puck murmured so that only I could hear.

“Shut up.” I smacked his arm. “I’m still learning, okay? This is like walking around on toothpicks.” He snickered, and I shifted my attention to the map spread out between them. “What are we looking at?”

“The plan,” Kimi answered, standing on tiptoes to bend over the table. “This is the SciCorp entrance,” the half-phouka continued, pointing to an obscure line near the bottom of the paper. I squinted, but I couldn’t make it out from all the other lines spread over the blueprint. “According to Warren,” Kimi went on, tracing a finger up to another line, “the scepter is being held here, between floors twenty-nine and thirty.”

“I still don’t know how that’s possible,” I muttered. “How can a building have a floor between floors?”

“The same way I can have a mansion between the mortal world and the Nevernever, darling,” Leanansidhe answered, looking at Grimalkin as if she really wanted to shoo him off the piano. “The Iron fey have their horrible glamour, just as we have ours. We turn into rabbits, they eat bank accounts. Grim, darling, do you *have* to sleep there?”

“You, Puck and Ironhorse will come in here,” Kimi continued, tapping the bottom of the blueprint. “Past the doors will be the security checkpoint, which will scan your ID card. Puck and Ironhorse will be invisible to mortal eyes, so we don’t have to worry about them being seen.”

“What if there are Iron fey on the first floor?” Puck asked.

“There aren’t,” Kimi replied, glancing at him. “Nelson and I checked it out. If the Iron fey are going into the building, they’re not using the front doors.”

That sounded ominous, like the Iron fey could have hidden doors or trods we didn’t know about, but there was nothing for it now.

“Once you’re past the checkpoint, the elevators are here,” Kimi went on, tracing the path with her finger before giving us a grave look. “And this is where things get dicey. I don’t know how you’re getting up to floor twenty-nine and a half. They might have a certain button only those with Sight can see, or there might be a password, or you might have to press buttons in a certain sequence. I have no idea. Alternatively, you can take the stairs, here, but that will mean climbing up thirty floors from ground level, with no guarantee there will be an entrance to floor twenty-nine and a half.”

“We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,” Puck said, waving it away. “So, what about the floor with the scepter? What can we expect?”

“Wait a minute,” I warned, putting a hand on his chest. “This sounds awfully risky. We don’t know if we can even get up to the twenty-ninth floor? How is this good planning?”

“Twenty-nine point five,” Puck corrected me. “And it’s not. Good planning, I mean. But, look at it this way.” He grinned. “We either go with our gut, or we don’t go at all. Not a lot of choices, Princess. But, don’t worry.” He put an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “You don’t need a plan. You have the Puck with you, remember? I’m an expert at this. And I’ve never needed an elaborate plan to pull anything off.”

There was a loud clank from the piano, as Leanansidhe finally convinced Grimalkin to sleep elsewhere. Annoyed, the cat had slid from his perch and landed with his full weight on the keys, then leaped to the bench. “Worry not, human,” the cat sighed, giving himself a thorough shake. “I am going with you as well. With Goodfellow’s exemplary planning, someone has to make sure you go through the right door.”

“Huh.” Puck snorted and glared at the feline. “That’s awfully helpful of you, cat. What’s in it for you?”

“Grimalkin and I worked something out, darling, don’t worry about it.” Leanansidhe gave the blueprint a cursory glance over Puck’s shoulder before dismissing it with a sniff. “Remember, pets, when you get to the floor where the scepter is being held, you must be prepared for anything. Robin, it will be up to you and the iron thing to protect the princess. I’m quite sure they won’t have the scepter lying around where anyone can snatch it. There will most likely be guards, wards, nasty things like that.”

“I WILL PROTECT THE PRINCESS WITH MY LIFE,” Ironhorse boomed, making Puck grimace and Kimi pin back her ears. “I SWEAR, WHILE I STILL LIVE AND BREATHE, NO HARM WILL BEFALL HER. WE WILL RETRIEVE THE SCEPTER, OR WE WILL DIE TRYING.”

“And personally, I’d like *not* to do the dying thing,” Puck added.

I was about to agree, when there was a commotion in the hall, and a moment later a human rushed into the room. It was Charles, the crazy piano player, looking as wild and panicked as I’d ever seen, even more than when we’d faced the redcaps. His anguished brown eyes met mine and he lurched forward, only to be stopped by Ironhorse stepping in front of me with a warning growl.

“She…she’s leaving?” Charles looked utterly despondent, wringing his hands and biting his bottom lip. “No no no. Can’t leave again. Can’t disappear. Stay.”

“Charles.” Leanansidhe’s voice made the air tremble, and the poor man gave her a terrified look. “What are you doing here? Go back to your room.”

“It’s all right, Charles,” I said quickly, as he looked on the verge of tears. “I’m not leaving for good. I’m coming back, don’t worry.”

He stopped wringing his hands, straightened, and looked at me dead on. And for just a moment, I saw him without the crazy light to his eyes. The way he must have been…before. Young. Tall. Handsome, with laugh lines around his mouth and jaw. A kind yet weary face. One that was vaguely familiar.

“You’ll come back?” he murmured. “Promise?”

I nodded. “Promise.”

Then Leanansidhe clapped her hands, the sharp rap making us jump. “Charles, darling,” she said, and was it my imagination, or did she sound a bit nervous? “You heard the girl. She’ll be back. Now, why don’t you find the other Charles and find something to play tonight? Go on, now. Shoo.” She waved her hand, and Charles, with one last look at me, stumbled from the room.

I frowned at Leanansidhe. “Other Charles? There’s more than one?”

“I call them all Charles, darling.” Leanansidhe shrugged. “I’m horrible with names, as you’ve no doubt seen, and human males look virtually the same to me. So they’re all Charles, for simplicity’s sake.”

Grimalkin sighed and leaped from the bench. “We are wasting time,” he announced, bottlebrush tail held straight up as he trotted past. “If we are going to get this circus started, we should leave now.”

“Good luck, darlings,” Leanansidhe called as we followed Grim out of the room. “When you return, you must tell me *all* about it. Meghan, dove, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

* * *

KIMI AND NELSON LED the way back to the outside world. We followed them through several rooms, where groups of fey and humans watched us leave, down a red carpeted hallway, then up a long spiral staircase that

finally stopped at a trapdoor in the ceiling. The trapdoor was oddly shaped: round, gray and heavy looking. I peered closer and saw that it was the bottom of a manhole cover. When Nelson pushed it up to peek through, bright sunlight spilled through the crack, and the smell of asphalt, tar and exhaust fumes assaulted my nose. While the half-troll scanned the road overhead, waiting for a clear spot, Kimi turned to me.

"This is as far as we go, I'm afraid." The little half-phouka looked disappointed as she handed me a plastic ID card on a string.

"You're not coming?"

She gave me an apologetic smile, nodding to Puck and Ironhorse. "Nah, you have your champions. Those two are pure-bloods. They'll be invisible to humans just by virtue of being fey. Nelson and I can't work glamour as well, and it would look suspicious if you were seen with a couple of streetrats in tow. Don't worry, though. We're really close to SciCorp, and from here you can take a taxi or something. Here." She handed me a slip of paper, scrawled on with bright green ink. "That's the address you're looking for. The trod back will be on Fourteenth and Maple, and you want the second manhole from the left. Got it?"

I nodded, as my stomach fluttered nervously. "Got it."

"Clear," Nelson grunted, and shoved the manhole cover out of the way. Puck scrambled out first, then pulled me up after him. As Ironhorse and Grimalkin crawled out, I gazed around the middle of a busy street, A horn blared, and a bright red Mustang screeched to a stop a few feet away. "Get out of the road, you crazy bitch!" the driver yelled from the window, and I scrambled to the edge of the curb. The driver roared off, oblivious to the massive Iron faery who swung a huge fist at the hood, barely missing.

"You ran a light anyway, dickhead!" I yelled after him, as Puck and Ironhorse joined me on the sidewalk. People stared at me, shaking their heads or chuckling under their breath. I scowled, trying to calm my racing heart. They wouldn't laugh if they could see Ironhorse looming over me like a protective bodyguard, glaring at anyone who got too close.

"Are you all right?" Puck asked anxiously, standing so close that his breath tickled my cheek. I nodded, and he kissed the top of my head, making butterflies swarm through my stomach. "Don't scare me like that, Princess."

"Well, that was amusing." Grimalkin hopped lightly onto the sidewalk, making a show of taking his sweet time. "Are we quite ready to go, now?

Human, you know where we are headed, correct?"

I looked down at the paper, still clutched in my hand. It trembled only a little. "You guys okay with taking a taxi?"

Puck made a face. "Now see, anyone else would have a few qualms about riding in a big metal box, but I've learned to deal." He smirked. "All those years I took the bus with you was good practice. Still, keep the windows open, Princess."

We found a pay phone, and I called for a taxi. Ten minutes later, a bright yellow cab pulled up, driven by a bearded man chewing a thick cigar. He kept glancing at me in the rearview window and smiling, oblivious to the two faeries pressed on either side of me, one glaring, one hanging his head out the window. I sat squashed between Puck and Ironhorse, with Grim on my lap and both windows rolled down, as we tore through the city streets. The smoke from the cabby's cigar stung my nose and made my eyes water, and Puck looked positively green.

At last, we pulled up in front of a gleaming tower, the sunlight reflecting off the mirrored walls as they rose into the sky. I paid the cab fare, and we piled out of the car. As soon as we were free of the cab, Puck started coughing. He looked pale and sweaty, and my heart lurched, remembering Ash in the wasteland of the Iron fey. Ironhorse watched him curiously, as though fascinated, and Grimalkin sat down to wash his tail.

"Ugh, that was unpleasant," Puck muttered when the harsh explosions finally stopped. He spit on the sidewalk and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I don't know what was worse, the cab or the stench coming from the guy's cigar."

"Will you be all right?" I gave him a worried look, but he just grinned.

"Never better, Princess. So, here we are." He craned his neck, gazing up at the looming expanse of SciCorp towers. His eyes gleamed with familiar mischief. "Let's get this party started."

* * *

MY HEART BEHAVED ITSELF until we passed through the large glass doors. Then it started beating my ribs so forcefully I thought they would break.

"Oh, wow," I whispered, stopping to gape at the enormous lobby. A great vaulted ceiling soared above us, maybe eight or ten stories, with strange metallic designs dangling from wires, glittering in the sun. People

in expensive suits rushed by us, designer shoes clicking over the sterile gray floor. I saw cameras in every corner, armed guards hovering by a turnstile security gate, and I locked my knees together to keep them from shaking.

"Steady, Princess." As I stood there, gawking like an idiot, Puck's firm hands came to rest on my shoulders. "You can do this. Keep your head up, your back straight, and it wouldn't hurt to sneer at anyone who makes eye contact." He squeezed my shoulders and bent close, his breath warm on my ear. "We're right behind you."

I gave my head a jerky bob. Puck squeezed my shoulders one last time and released me. Raising my chin, I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders and marched toward the security desk.

A guard in a slate-gray uniform eyed me with disinterest as I approached, looking the way I felt in algebra class, eyes glazed over and bored. The man in front of me muttered a quick, "Mornin', Ed," before passing his ID card under a scanner. The red light blipped to green, and the man swept through the turnstile.

My turn. Adopting what I hoped was an imperious expression, I sauntered up to the gate. "Good morning, Edward," I greeted, slipping Rosalyn Smith's badge under the flickering red scanner light. The guard bobbed his head with a polite smile, not even looking at me. *Ha*, I thought, triumphant. *That was easy. We're home free.*

Then the scanner let out a shrill warning beep, and my heart stood still.

Ed stood up, frowning. "Sorry, miss," he said, as ice water began creeping up my spine. "But I'll have to see your badge."

Puck, Grim and Ironhorse, already on the other side of the gate, looked back fearfully. I swallowed my terror, wondering if we should abandon the plan now and get the hell out. The guard held out his hand, waiting, and I forced myself to be calm.

"Of course." Thankfully, my voice didn't crack as I looped the badge from my neck and held it out. The guard took it and held it up to his face, squinting his eyes. I felt a dozen gazes on the back of my neck, and crossed my arms, trying to appear bored and irritated.

"Sorry, Ms. Smith." Ed finally looked up at me. "But did you know your card expired yesterday? You'll have to get a new one before tomorrow."

“Oh.” Relief bloomed through my stomach. Maybe I could pull this off after all. “Of course,” I muttered, trying to sound embarrassed. “I’ve been meaning to renew it, but you know how busy it’s been lately. I just haven’t had the time. I’ll take care of it before I leave today. Thank you.”

“No problem, Ms. Smith.” Ed handed me the badge and tipped his hat. “You have a good morning.” He pressed a button and waved me through.

I hurried around a corner and collapsed against the wall before I started hyperventilating.

“None of that, Princess,” Puck said, pulling me to my feet just as a group of businessmen turned the corner, talking about reports and staff meetings and firing a junior executive. I avoided eye contact as they swept by, but they paid me no attention.

“By the way, you did great back there,” Puck went on as we made our way down the brightly lit corridor. “I thought you would lose it, but you kept it together. Nice job, Princess.”

I grinned.

“First hurdle cleared,” Puck continued cheerfully. “Now, all we have to do is find floor twenty-nine point five, grab the scepter, and get out again. We’re halfway home.”

Easy for him to say. My heart had gone into overdrive, and a cold sweat was still dripping down the backs of my knees. I was just about to say so, when I noticed we had another problem. “Um, where’s Grimalkin?”

We glanced around hastily, but the cat had disappeared. Maybe his faith in the plan had been shaken by the little scene at the gate, or maybe he’d just decided “the hell with this,” and had taken off. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“WHY WOULD HE ABANDON US?” Ironhorse questioned, making me wince as his voice echoed down the hall. Thank goodness humans couldn’t hear faeries, either. “I THOUGHT THE CAITH SITH HAD HONORABLE INTENTIONS. I WOULD NOT HAVE PEGGED HIM A COWARD.”

Puck snorted. “You don’t know Grimalkin very well, then,” he commented, but I wasn’t sure I agreed. Grimalkin had always come through for us, even when he disappeared with no explanation. Though Ironhorse looked stunned, I wasn’t worried; Grimalkin would most assuredly pop up again when least expected.

“Never mind.” I turned and continued walking. Ironhorse still looked confused, almost hurt that an ally could betray him like this. I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “It’s okay, Ironhorse. Grim can take care of himself, and he’ll show up if we need him. We should keep looking for the scepter.”

“IF YOU SAY SO, PRINCESS.”

At the end of the corridor, we came to a pair of elevators.

“Floor twenty-nine point five,” I mused, pressing the up button. A few seconds passed before the doors opened with a *ding* and two women exited, passing us without a second glance. Peeking inside, I scanned the wall but, as I expected, there was no button 29.5.

I stepped over the threshold into the box, Ironhorse following at my heels. Cheerful orchestra music played at a muted volume over the speakers, and the floor was carpeted in red. Puck rushed inside and stood in the middle of the floor, away from the walls, arms crossed tightly to his chest. Ironhorse turned and blinked at him.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, GOODFELLOW?” he asked, his voice nearly bringing tears to my eyes as it echoed within the box. Puck gave him a fearsome smile.

“Me? I’m fine. Big metal box in a big metal tube? Not a problem. Hurry and get us to the right floor, Princess.”

I nodded and unfolded a piece of paper from my suit pocket, holding it up to the light. “Well, here goes nothing,” I murmured, and started punching in the code on the elevator buttons. 1-1-1-3-1-2-2-1-1-3. The numbers lit up as they were punched, singing out a little tune like the buttons on a cell phone.

I hit the last *3* and stepped back, waiting and holding my breath. For a moment, nothing happened. Ironhorse’s raspy breathing echoed off the metal walls, filling the box with the smell of smoke. Puck coughed and muttered something under his breath. I started to punch the code in again, thinking I’d pressed a wrong button, when the doors swooshed shut. The lights dimmed, the music ceased, and a large white button shimmered into existence, marked with a bold 29.5.

I shared a glance with my companions, who nodded.

“Floor twenty-nine point five,” I whispered, and hit the button with my thumb. “Going up.”

* * *

THE ELEVATOR STOPPED, and the doors opened with a cheerful ding.

We peered out at a long, brightly lit hallway with numerous doors lining its walls and gray tiles leading to single door at the very end. I knew we were in the right place. I could feel it in the air, a faint buzz, a sharp tingle just below my skin. It made my neck hairs stand on end, and was oddly familiar. Glancing at Puck and Ironhorse, I knew they could feel it, too.

We inched down the corridor, Puck in front and Ironhorse bringing up the rear. Around us, our footsteps echoed in the silence. We passed doors without hesitation, knowing they were the wrong ones. I could feel the buzzing getting louder the closer we got to the end of the hall.

Then, we were at the last door, and Puck leaned against it, putting his ear to the wood. *I don't hear anything,* he mouthed at us, and pointed to the handle. *Shall we?*

Ironhorse nodded, clenching his massive fists. Puck reached down and freed his daggers, gesturing to me with a point. Biting my lip, I reached out and carefully turned the handle.

The door swung forward with a creak, and a waft of frigid air hit me in the face. I shivered, resisting the impulse to rub my arms as my breath clouded the air before me. Someone had cranked the AC down to like zero degrees; the room was a freezer box as we stepped inside.

A dozen or so humans in expensive business suits sat around a long, U-shaped table in the center of the floor. From the looks of it, we had interrupted a business meeting, for they all turned and stared at me with various degrees of annoyance and confusion. At the end of the table, a swivel chair sat with its back to us, hiding the speaker or CEO or whoever was in charge. I suddenly remembered all the times I'd snuck into class late and had to scurry down the aisles to my desk while everyone watched. My face burned, and for a moment, you could hear a pin drop.

"Um, sorry," I muttered, backing away. The business suits continued to stare at me. "Sorry. Wrong room. We'll just…go."

"Oh, why don't you stick around, my dear." The buzzing, high-pitched voice made my skin crawl. At the front of the table, the figure swiveled the chair around to face us, smiling. She wore a neon-green business suit, radioactive-blue lipstick, and bright yellow glasses above a thin, sneering

face. Her hair, a myriad of computer cables, was bound atop her head in a colorful mockery of a bun. She held the scepter in green-nailed hands, like a queen observing her subjects, and my stomach gave a jolt of recognition.

"VIRUS!" Ironhorse boomed.

"No need to shout, old man. I'm right here." Virus put her heels on the table and regarded us smugly. "I've been waiting for you, girl. Looking for this, are you?" She lifted her arm, and I gasped. The Scepter of the Seasons pulsed a strange, sickly green light through her fingers. Virus bared her teeth in a smile. "I was expecting the girl and her clown to come sniffing after it, but I never expected the honorable Ironhorse to turn on us. Tsk-tsk." She shook her head. "Loyalty is so overrated these days. How the mighty have fallen."

"YOU DARE ACCUSE ME?" Ironhorse stalked forward, smoke drifting from his mouth and nostrils. We hurried after him. "YOU ARE THE BETRAYER, WHO FOLLOWS THE COMMANDS OF THE FALSE KING. YOU ARE THE ONE WHO HAS FALLEN."

"Don't be so melodramatic," Virus sighed. "As usual, you have no idea what is really going on. You think I want to follow the wheezings of an obsolete monarch? I want that even less than you. When he put me in charge of stealing the scepter, I knew that was the last command I would ever follow. Poor Tertius, believing I was still loyal to his false king. The gullible fool handed me the scepter without a second thought." She smiled at us, fierce and terrible. "Now, *I* have the Scepter of the Seasons. I have the power. And if the false king wants it, he'll have to take it from me by force."

"I see," I said, coming to a stop a few feet from her. Around us, the men in business suits continued to stare. "*You* want to become the next ruler. You had no intention of giving it to the Iron King."

"Can you blame me?" Virus swung her feet off the table to smile at me. "How often have you disobeyed your king because his commands were rubbish? Goodfellow—" she pointed the scepter at Puck "—how often has the thought of rebelling crossed *your* mind? Don't tell me you've been a faithful little monkey, catering to Oberon's every desire, in all the years you've known him."

"That's different," I said.

"Really?" Virus sneered at me. "I can tell you, it wasn't difficult to convince Rowan. That boy's hatred and jealousy are inspiring. All he

needed was a little push, a tiny promise of power, and he betrayed everything he knew. He was the one who told me you were coming for the scepter, you know." She snorted. "Of course, the claims of becoming immune to iron are completely false. As if thousands of years of history can be rewritten or erased. Iron and technology have been and will always be lethal to the traditional fey. That's why we're so inherently superior to you oldbloods. That's why you're going to fall so easily after the war."

Ironhorse growled, the furious rumble of an oncoming train. "I WILL TAKE THAT SCEPTER AND PLACE THE TRUE MONARCH OF THE IRON FEY ON THE THRONE," he vowed, taking a threatening step forward. "YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME NOW, TRAITOR. YOUR HUMAN PUPPETS WILL NOT BE ENOUGH TO PROTECT YOU."

"Ah ah ah." Virus waggled a finger at him. "Not so fast. I didn't want my drones up here because they are delicate and rather squishy, but I'm not quite so stupid as to be unguarded." She smiled and gazed around the table. "All right, gentlemen. Meeting adjourned."

At that, all the humans sitting at the tables stood, shedding glamour like discarded jackets, filling the air with fraying strands of illusion. Human facades dropped away, to reveal a dozen faeries in spiky black armor, their faces sickly and pale beneath their helms. As one, the Thornguards drew their serrated black swords and pointed them at us, trapping us in a ring of faery steel.

My stomach twisted violently, wanting to crawl up my throat and make a break for the door. I heard Puck's exhalation of breath and Ironhorse's dismayed snort as he pressed closer to me. Virus snickered, leaning back in her chair.

"I'm afraid you've walked nose first into a trap, m'dears," she gloated as we tensed, ready to run or fight. "Oh, but you don't want to rush off now. I have one last little surprise for you." She giggled and snapped her fingers.

The door behind her creaked, and a dark figure stepped into the room, coming to stand behind the chair. This time, my heart dropped to my toes and stayed there.

"I'm sure you four know each other," Virus said, as my world shrank down to a narrow tunnel, blocking everything else out. "My greatest creation so far, I think. It took six Thornguards and nearly two dozen drones to bring him down, but it was *so* worth it. Ironic, isn't it? He nearly

got away with the scepter the first time, and now he'll do anything to keep it here."

No, my mind whispered. *This isn't happening. No no no no no.*

"Ash," Virus purred as the figure came into the light, "say hello to our guests."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Traitor

I stared at Ash in a daze, torn between relief that he was alive and an acute, sickening despair. This couldn't be real, what was happening. I had stepped into a nightmare world, where everything I loved was twisted into something monstrous and horrible. My legs felt weak, and I had to lean against Puck or I would've fallen.

Ironhorse snorted. "AN ILLUSION," he mocked, staring at Ash in contempt. "A SIMPLE GLAMOUR, NOTHING MORE. I HAVE SEEN WHAT HAPPENS TO THE OLDBLOODS YOU IMPLANT WITH YOUR FOUL BUGS. THEY GO MAD, AND THEN THEY DIE. THAT IS NOT THE WINTER PRINCE, ANY MORE THAN THESE GUARDS."

"You think?" Virus's grin was frighteningly smug. "Well, if you're so sure, old man, you're welcome to try to stop him. It should be easy to defeat one simple guard, although I think you'll find the task harder than you ever expected." She turned a purely sadistic smile on me. "The princess knows, don't you, my dear?"

Ironhorse turned, a question in his eyes, but I couldn't take my gaze off Virus's bodyguard. "It's not an illusion," I whispered. "It really is him." The way my heart fluttered around my chest proved this was real. I stepped forward, ignoring the bristling Thornguard weapons, and the prince's gaze sharpened, cutting me like a knife. "Ash," I whispered, "it's me. Are you hurt? Say something."

Ash regarded me blankly, no glint of recognition in his silver eyes: no anger, sorrow, nothing. "All of you," he said in a quiet voice, "will die."

Shock and horror lanced through me, holding me immobile. Virus giggled her hateful, buzzing laugh. "It's no use," she taunted. "He hears you, he even recognizes you, but he remembers nothing of his old life. He's been completely reprogrammed, thanks to my bug. And now, he listens only to me."

I looked closer, and my heart twisted even more. In the shadows of the room, the prince's face was ashen, the skin pulled so tight across his bones it had split in places, showing open wounds beneath. His cheeks were hollow, and his eyes, though blank and empty, were bright with unspoken pain. I recognized that look; it was the same look Edgebriar had turned on us in the cave, teetering on the edge of madness. "It's killing him," I whispered.

"Well, only a little."

"Stop it," I hissed, and Virus arched a sardonic eyebrow. My heart pounded, but I set my jaw and plunged on. "Please," I begged, stepping forward. "Let him go. Let me take his place. I'll sign a contract, make a bargain, anything, if that's what you want. But take the bug out of his head and let him go."

"Meghan!" Puck snapped, and Ironhorse stared at me in horror. I didn't care. I couldn't let Ash fade away into nothing, as if he had never existed at all. I imagined myself in a field of white flowers, watching a ghostly Ash and Ariella dance together in the moonlight, together at last. Except it would be a lie. Ash wouldn't be with his true love, even in death. He wouldn't be anything.

Virus chuckled. "Such devotion," she murmured, rising from the chair. "I'm terribly moved. Come here, Ash." Ash immediately stepped up beside her, and Virus laid a hand on his chest. "You should congratulate me," Virus continued, regarding the prince like a student with a winning science project. "I've finally discovered a way to implant my bugs in the fey system without killing them outright, or driving them mad within the first few hours. Instead of rewriting his brain—" she stroked Ash's hair, and I clenched my shaking fists, fighting the urge to leap across the table and rip out her eyes "—I had it take over his cervical nervous system, here." Her fingers dropped to the base of his skull, caressing it. "You're welcome to try to carve it out, I suppose, but I'm afraid that will be quite fatal for him. Only *I* can order my bugs to willingly release their hosts. As for your offer…" She threw me an indulgent smile. "You have only one thing I want, and I will take that from you momentarily. No, I find that I prefer my bodyguard as he is, for however long he has left."

My heart pounded. He was so close. I could reach over the table, grab his hand and pull him to safety. "Ash!" I cried, holding out my hand.

“Jump, now! Come on, you can fight it. Please…” My voice dropped to a whisper. “Don’t do this. Don’t make us fight you…”

Ash gazed straight ahead, not moving a muscle, and a sob tore free from my throat. I couldn’t reach him. Ash was lost to us. The cold stranger across the table had taken his place.

“Well.” Virus took a step back. “This has grown tiresome. I think it’s time I took what I want from you, my dear. Ash.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Kill the princess. Kill them all.”

With a flash of blue light, Ash drew his sword and slashed it across the table. It happened so quickly, I didn’t even have time to scream before the icy blade streaked down at my face.

Puck lunged in front of me and caught the blade with his own, deflecting it with a screech and a flurry of sparks. I stumbled back and Puck grabbed my wrist, dragging me away even as I protested. “Retreat!” he yelled as the Thornguards leaped across the tables with a roar. I looked back and saw Ash jump gracefully onto the table, his terrible blank gaze fastened on me. “Ironhorse, fall back, there are too many of them!”

With a bellow and a blast of flame, Ironhorse reared up into his true form, breathing fire and lashing out with his hooves. The guards fell back in shock and Ironhorse charged, knocking several aside and clearing a path to the door. As the huge Iron fey thundered past, Puck shoved me toward the exit. “Go!” he shouted, and whirled to block Ash’s sword, slicing down at his back.

“Ash, stop this!” I cried, but the Winter prince paid me no attention. As the Thornguards closed on us again, Puck snarled a curse and threw a fuzzy black ball into their midst.

It burst into a maddened grizzly, which reared up with a booming roar, startling everything in the room. As the Thornguards and Ash turned toward this new threat, Puck grabbed my hand and yanked me out of the room.

“Been saving that, just in case,” he panted, as Ironhorse snorted with appreciation. “Now let’s get out of here.”

We ran for the elevator. The hallway seemed longer now, the steel doors deliberately keeping their distance. I looked back once and saw Ash stalking toward us, his sword radiating blue light through the corridor. The icy calm on his face sent a bolt of raw fear through me, and I wrenched my eyes from him.

Ahead of us, the elevator dinged. A second later, the doors slid open, and a squadron of Thornguards stepped into the hall.

"Oh, you gotta be kidding me," Puck exclaimed as we skidded to a halt. As one, the knights drew their swords and marched forward in unison, filling the corridor with the ring of their boots.

I looked behind us. Ash was advancing steadily as well, his eyes glassy and terrifying.

A click echoed through the hall and miraculously, one of the side doors swung open.

"How predictable," Grimalkin sighed, appearing in the doorway. We gaped at him, and he regarded us with amusement. "I thought you might need a second way out. Why is it always up to me to think of these things?"

"I would kiss you, cat," Puck said as we crowded through the doorway, "if we weren't in such a hurry. Also, the hairballs could be unpleasant."

I slammed the door and leaned against it, gasping as we took in our newest surroundings. A vast white room stretched before us, filled with hundreds upon hundreds of cubicles, creating a labyrinth of aisles. A low hum vibrated in the air, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of tapping keys. Humans sat at desks within each cubicle, dressed in identical white shirts and gray pants, staring glassy-eyed at the monitors as they typed away.

"Whoa," Puck muttered, looking around. "Cubicle hell."

Simultaneously, the tapping stopped. Chairs shifted and groaned as every single human in the room stood up and, as one, turned in our direction. And, as one, they opened their mouths and spoke.

"We see you, Meghan Chase. You will not escape."

If I hadn't been filled with a hollow, bone-numbing despair, I would've been terrified. Puck cursed and pulled out his dagger just as a *boom* shook the door behind us. "Looks like we're going straight through," he muttered, narrowing his eyes. "Grimalkin, get moving! Rusty, clear us a path!"

Grimalkin bounded into the maze, dodging feet and weaving through legs as the hordes of zombie-drones shuffled toward us. Ironhorse pawed the tile, put his head down and charged with a roar. Drones flung themselves at him, punching and clawing, but they bounced off or were thrown aside as the angry Iron fey stampeded through the hall. Puck and I

followed in his wake, leaping over downed bodies, dodging the hands that grabbed for us. Someone latched on to my ankle once, but I let out a shriek and kicked him in the face, knocking him back. He fell away clutching my shoe, and I quickly shook the other off, running barefoot through the hall.

The maze of aisles and cubicles seemed to go on forever. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the mob of zombie heads bobbing above the cubicle walls, following us.

"Dammit," Puck snarled, following my gaze, "they're coming fast. How much farther, cat?"

"Here," Grimalkin said, darting around a cubicle. The room finally ended with a stark white wall and a door in the corner, marked with an Exit sign. "The emergency stairs," he explained as we rushed forward in relief. "This will take us to the street level. Hurry!"

As we charged the door, Ash stepped out of an aisle next to us, appearing from nowhere. There was no time to think or scream a warning. I threw myself to the side, hitting the wall with a jolt that knocked the wind from my lungs.

Time seemed to slow. Puck and Ironhorse bellowed something from far away. A blinding stab of pain shot up my arm. When I grabbed for it, my palm came away slick and wet. For a second, I stared at my fingers, not understanding.

What happened? Did Ash…do this? Ash cut me?

Stunned, I looked up into the glassy eyes of the Unseelie prince, his sword raised for the killing blow.

For just a moment, he hesitated. I saw the sword waver as his arm trembled, a flicker of torment crossing his face. Just a moment, before the blade came flashing down, but it was enough time for Ironhorse to lunge between us, shoving Ash away. I heard the hideous screech of metal as the blade ripped into Ironhorse's side and he staggered, almost going to his knees. Then Puck was pulling me to my feet, yelling at Ironhorse to get moving, and I was being dragged through the door, screaming at Puck to let me go. Ironhorse lurched to his feet and followed, dripping a thick black substance behind him, his wheezing breaths echoing down the stairwell. As we escaped SciCorp and fled into the streets, the last thing I remembered was watching the door close behind me on the stairs and seeing Ash's face through the window, a single tear frozen on his cheek.

PART THREE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Choices

In my dream, he was kneeling in the dead grass beneath a great iron tree, head bent, dark hair hiding his face. Around us, a swirling gray fog blanketed everything beyond a few feet, but I could sense another presence here, a cold, hostile being, watching me with cruel intelligence. I tried to ignore it as I approached the figure beneath the tree. He was shirtless, his pale skin covered in tiny red wounds, like punctures, down his spine and across his shoulders.

I blinked. For a moment, I could see the glistening strings of wire sunk into his body, coiling up and vanishing into the fog. I quickened my pace, but with every step I took, the body under the tree moved farther away. I started to run, stumbling and panting, but the fog was drawing him back into its possessive embrace, claiming him for its own.

Desperately, I called to him. He raised his head, and the look on his face was beyond despair. It was utter defeat, hopelessness and pain. His lips moved wordlessly, then the fog coiled around him and he was lost.

I stood there shivering as the mist grew dark, and the other presence hovered at the edge of my consciousness. As the dream faded and I sank into oblivion, I could still see his final words, mouthed to me in desperation, and they chilled me like nothing else.

Kill me.

* * *

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED slowly. I clawed myself up from sleep, feeling dizzy and confused as the world came into focus. Thankfully, I recognized my surroundings almost immediately. Leanansidhe's mansion: the foyer, if the huge fireplace was any indication. I lay on one of her comfortable sofas, dressed in slacks and a loose-collared shirt. Someone had taken off the slinky business suit, and of course I'd left my heels back in SciCorp.

“What happened?” I murmured, struggling to sit up. A blinding flare of pain stabbed up my arm and shoulder, and I gasped.

“Easy, Princess.” Suddenly Puck was there, pushing me back down. “You lost a nice amount of blood—it made you woozy. You passed out on our way here. Just sit still for a minute.”

I looked at the thick gauze wrapped around my arm and shoulder, a faint pink stain coming through the bandage. It hadn’t even hurt until now.

A knot tightened in my stomach as hazy memories pushed their way to the surface. My throat closed up, and I suddenly felt like crying. Pushing those feelings away, I took a shaky breath and focused on the present.

“Where’s Ironhorse?” I demanded. “And Grim? Did everyone get out okay?”

“I AM FINE, PRINCESS.” Ironhorse, back in his more human form, peered over the couch at me. “A LITTLE LESS THAN WHEN WE STARTED, BUT I WILL LIVE. MY ONLY REGRET IS THAT I COULD NOT PROTECT YOU FULLY.”

“Really?” The door opened and Leanansidhe entered the room, followed by Grim and two brownies bearing a tray with mugs. “I would have a few more regrets than that, darling. Meghan, dove, try to drink this. It should help.”

I struggled to sit up, gritting my teeth against the pain. Puck knelt beside the couch and eased me into a sitting position, then handed me the mug the brownies offered. The hot liquid smelled strongly of herbs, making my eyes water. I took a cautious sip, made a face, and swallowed it down.

“Kimi and Nelson?” I asked, forcing down more of the stuff. Gah, it was like drinking potpourri in hot water, but I could feel it working as it slid down my throat—a warm drowsiness stealing through my system. “Are they here, too?”

Leanansidhe swept around the couch, trailing smoke from her cigarette holder. “Haven’t checked in yet, darling, but I’m sure they’re fine. They’re smart kids.” With a flourish, she sat in the opposite chair and crossed her legs, watching me over her cigarette. “So, before that kicks in, dove, why don’t you tell me what happened in there? Grimalkin told me some of it, but he wasn’t there for the whole operation, and I can’t get a cohesive story from this pair—” she waved her cigarette at Ironhorse and Puck “—

because they're too busy worrying over you. Why couldn't you get the scepter, darling? What happened in SciCorp?"

The memories flooded in, and the despair I'd been hiding from descended like a heavy blanket. "Ash," I whispered, feeling tears prick my eyes. "It was Ash. She has him."

"The prince?"

"Virus has him," I continued in a daze. "She put one of her mind-control bugs inside him, and he attacked us. He tried…tried to kill us."

"He's the one guarding the scepter," Puck added, collapsing in a chair. "Him and about two dozen nasty Thornguards, and a whole building of Virus's little human drones." He shook his head. "I've fought Ash before, but not like this. Whenever we dueled, there was always a small part of him, deep down, that wasn't serious. I know his royal iciness, and I knew he really didn't want to kill me, no matter how much he boasted otherwise. That's why our little feud has lasted so long." Puck snorted and crossed his arms, looking grave. "The thing I fought today wasn't the frosty Ice prince we all know and love. There's nothing there anymore. No anger, no hate, no fear. He's more dangerous now than he ever was before, because he doesn't care if he lives or dies."

Silence fell. All I could hear was the faint sound of Grimalkin sharpening his claws on the sofa. I wanted to lie down and cry, but the herbs were kicking in, and my depression was giving way to a numbing exhaustion. "So," Leanansidhe ventured at last, "what will you do now?"

I stirred, fighting the drowsiness. "We go back," I murmured, looking at Puck and Ironhorse, hoping they would back me up. "We have to. We have to get the scepter and stop the war. There's no other way around it." Both nodded gravely, and I relaxed, grateful and relieved that they would follow me on this. "At least we know what we're up against now," I continued, grabbing for a faint ray of hope. "We might have a better chance the second time around."

"And the Winter prince?" Leanansidhe asked softly. "What will you do with him?"

I glanced at her sharply, about to tell her that we would save Ash and I didn't like what she was implying, but Puck beat me to it.

"We have to kill him."

The world screeched to a halt. Slowly, I turned my head to stare at Puck, unable to believe what I just heard. "How could you?" I whispered.

“He was your friend. You fought side by side. And now you want to cut him down like it was nothing!”

“You saw what he did.” Puck met my eyes, beseeching. “You saw what he *is* now. I don’t think I can fight him without holding back. If he attacks you again—”

“You don’t want to save him,” I accused, leaning forward. My arm throbbed, but I was too angry to care. “You don’t even want to try! You’re jealous, and you’ve always wanted him out of the way!”

“I never said that!”

“You don’t have to! I can see it on your face!”

“HE’S DYING, PRINCESS.”

Words froze in my throat. I stared at Ironhorse, silently pleading with him to be wrong. He gazed back with a sorrowful expression. “No.” I shook my head, fighting the persistent tears that stung my eyes. “I won’t believe that. There has to be a way to save him.”

“I AM SORRY, PRINCESS.” Ironhorse bowed his head. “I KNOW YOUR FEELINGS FOR THE WINTER PRINCE, AND I WISH I COULD GIVE YOU BETTER NEWS. BUT THERE IS NO WAY TO FORCEFULLY REMOVE THE BUGS ONCE THEY HAVE BEEN IMPLANTED. NOT WITHOUT KILLING THE HOST.” He sighed, and his tone softened, though the volume did not. “GOODFELLOW IS RIGHT. THE WINTER PRINCE IS FAR TOO DANGEROUS. IF HE ATTACKS AGAIN, WE CANNOT HOLD BACK.”

“What about Virus?” I pressed, unwilling to give up. “She’s the one controlling the bugs. If we take her out, maybe her hold on him will—”

“Even if that were the case,” Puck interrupted, “the bug would still be inside him. And with no way to get it out, he’ll either go mad, or be in so much torment that he would be better off dead. Ash is strong, Princess, but that thing inside him is killing him. You saw it, you heard what Virus said.” His brow furrowed, and his voice went very soft. “I don’t think he has much time left.”

The tears pressing behind my eyes finally spilled over, and I buried my face in the pillow, biting the fabric to keep from screaming. God, it wasn’t fair! What did they want from me? Hadn’t I given enough already? I’d sacrificed everything—family, home, a normal life—for the stupid greater good. I had worked so hard; I was trying to be brave and mature about

everything, but now I had to watch while the thing I loved most was killed in front of me?

I couldn't. Even if it was impossible, even if Ash killed me himself, I would still try to save him.

The room had grown very quiet. I peeked up and saw that everyone except Puck had left, slipping from the room to let me come to terms with myself, and the decision looming over my head, in peace.

Seeing me glance up, Puck tried catching my gaze. "Meghan…"

I turned away, pressing my face into the cushions. Anger and resentment boiled; Puck was the last person I wanted to see, much less talk to. Right now, I hated him. "Go away, Puck."

He sighed and rose from the chair, coming to perch on the sofa next to me. "Well, you know that never works."

The silence stretched between us. I sensed that Puck wanted to say something but couldn't seem to find the right words. Which was odd; I'd never known him to hesitate about anything.

"I won't let you kill him," I finally muttered after a few minutes of quiet.

There was a lengthy pause before he answered. "Would you ask me to watch you die?" he murmured slowly. "Stand by while he puts a sword through your heart? Or, maybe you want me to die instead. You could just tell me to stand still while Ash chops off my head. Would that make you happy, Princess?"

"Don't be stupid!" I bit my lip in frustration and sat up, wincing as the room spun for a moment. "I don't want anyone to die. But I can't lose him, Puck." My anger abruptly drained away, leaving only a hollow despair. "I can't lose you, either."

Puck put his arms around me and pulled me close, gently so as to not jolt my wounded arm. I laid my head on his chest and closed my eyes, wishing I were normal, that I didn't have to make these impossible decisions, that everything would be all right again. If wishes were horses…

"What do want me to do, Princess?" Puck whispered into my hair.

"If there's any way we can save him…"

He nodded. "I'll try very hard not to kill his royal iciness if we meet again. Believe it or not, Princess, I don't want Ash dead, any more than you do." He sniffed. "Well, maybe a little more than you. But…" And he

pulled back to look me in the eye. “If he puts you in danger, I won’t hold back. That’s my promise. I won’t risk losing *you,* either, understand?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, closing my eyes. That was all I could ask. *I’ll save you,* I thought, as drowsiness stole over me and my mind drifted. *No matter what, I’ll find a way to bring you back. I promise.*

I was nearly asleep, surrendering to the exhaustion stealing all my coherent thoughts, when a slamming door jerked me awake and Puck’s arms tightened around me.

“Meghan Chase.” Kimi’s voice cut across the room, clipped, flat and mechanical. I looked up and my stomach dropped away.

Kimi and Nelson stood beside the door like soldiers at attention, a posture so strange for both of them that I didn’t recognize them at first. As one, their heads turned, and they gave me an empty stare. The same look Ash had turned on me back in SciCorp.

“Oh, no,” I whispered. Puck went stiff with shock.

“Our Mistress has a message for you, Meghan Chase.” Kimi took a short step forward, moving like a robot. “‘Congratulations for breaking into SciCorp and, more impressive, breaking out again. You have my admiration. Unfortunately, I cannot have you running amok, making plans to return for the scepter, as I know you will. I’ll be moving it tonight to a safer location. If you come back to SciCorp, I’m afraid you’ll find it quite empty. Oh, and by the way, I’m also sending Ash to kill your family. They’re in Louisiana, right?’”

I sucked in a breath, and the blood drained from my face. Kimi’s expression didn’t change, but her voice turned mocking. “‘So you have a choice now, my dear. Come back for the scepter, or run home and try to stop Ash. You’d better hurry. He’s probably halfway to the bayou by now.

“‘One more thing!’” she added as I leaped to my feet, drowsiness forgotten. Heart pounding, I glared at her. Robot Kimi gave me an empty smile. “‘I want you to remember, this is not a game, Meghan Chase. If you think you can waltz into my lair and try to take what is mine without repercussions, you’d best think again. People will get hurt because of you.’” Kimi stepped forward and narrowed her eyes. “‘Do not screw with me, child. Let this be a little reminder of what can happen when you play with the big girls.’”

Kimi spasmed, spine arching back, mouth open in a silent scream as she twitched and thrashed. A moment later, Nelson did the same, limbs

jerking wildly, before they both collapsed to the floor.

Puck was beside Kimi instantly, rolling her over. The little half-phouka's eyes were open, gazing sightlessly at the ceiling, and she didn't move a muscle. I bit my lip, my heart pounding. "Are they…dead?"

He paused a moment before rising to his feet. "No. At least, I don't think so. They're still breathing, but…" He frowned, squinting at Kimi's slack expression. "I think their brains have short-circuited. Or the bugs are keeping them in some sort of coma." He shook his head, looking up at me. "Sorry, Princess. I can't do anything for them."

"Of course you can't, darling." Leanansidhe breezed through the doorway, her face a porcelain mask, eyes glowing green. "Fortunately, I know a mortal doctor who might be able to help. If he cannot revive the streetrats, then there is no hope for them." She turned to me, and I tried not to cringe under that unearthly gaze. "You are leaving, I presume?"

I nodded. "Ash is out there," I said. "He's going after my family. I have to stop him." I narrowed my eyes, staring her down. "Don't try to keep me here."

She sighed. "I could, darling, but then you would be a complete mess and of no use to us. If there is one thing I've learned about humans, it's that they become absolutely unreasonable when it comes to family." She sniffed and waved her hand. "So go, darling. Rescue your mother and father and brother and get it over with. My door will still be open when you come back. If we're still alive, that is."

"PRINCESS!" Ironhorse bashed the door open, skidding to a halt in the middle of the room, breathing hard. "ARE YOU HURT? WHAT HAS HAPPENED?"

I gazed around for my sneakers, wincing as a bright talon of pain clawed up my arm. "Virus sent Ash to kill my family," I said, dropping to my knees to peer under the couch. "I'm going to stop him."

"WHAT ABOUT THE SCEPTER?" he continued, as I pulled out my sneakers and stuffed my feet into them, gritting my teeth as my arm throbbed with every movement. "WE MUST RETRIEVE IT BEFORE VIRUS HAS IT MOVED. SHE IS VULNURABLE NOW AND WILL NOT BE EXPECTING US. NOW IS THE TIME TO ATTACK."

"No." I felt pulled in several directions at once, and tried to stay calm. "I'm sorry, Ironhorse. I know we have to get the scepter, but my family comes first. Always. I don't expect you to understand."

“VERY WELL,” Ironhorse said, surprising me. “THEN I WILL COME WITH YOU.”

Startled, I looked up at him, but before I could reply, Grimalkin interrupted me.

“A quaint idea,” the cat mused, leaping onto the table, “and exactly what Virus is hoping for. We must have scared her quite a bit for her to react so dramatically. If we abandon the mission now, we might never find her again.”

“He’s right.” I nodded, ignoring Ironhorse’s scowl. “We have to split up. Ironhorse, you stay here with Grim. Keep looking for the scepter and Virus. Puck and I will go after Ash. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“I DO NOT LIKE LEAVING YOU ALONE, PRINCESS.” Ironhorse raised his head in a proud, stubborn manner. “I SWORE I WOULD PROTECT YOU.”

“While we were looking for the scepter, you did. But this is different.” I stood up and met his burning red eyes. “This is personal, Ironhorse. And your mission has always been the scepter. I want you to stay behind with Grim. Keep looking for Virus.” He opened his mouth to argue, and I spit out the last words. “That’s an order.”

He blew smoke from his nostrils like a furious bull and turned away. “AS YOU WISH, PRINCESS.”

His voice was stiff, but there was no time to dwell on feelings of guilt. I turned to Puck. “We have to get to Louisiana fast. How do we get out of here?”

He glanced at Leanansidhe. “Don’t suppose you have any trods to Louisiana from here, do you, Lea?”

“There’s one to New Orleans,” Leanansidhe replied, looking thoughtful. “I just adore Mardi Gras, darling, though Mab tends to hog the spotlight every year. Typical of her.”

“That’s too far away.” I took a deep breath, feeling time slip away from me. “Isn’t there a trod that’s closer? I need to get home *now*.”

“The Briars.” Puck snapped his fingers. “We can go through the Briars. That will take us there quickly.”

Leanansidhe blinked. “What makes you think there is a trod to the girl’s house through the Briars, dove?”

Puck snorted. “Lea, I know you. You can’t stand to be out of the loop, remember? You must have a trod that goes to Meghan’s house from the

Briars, even though you can’t use it. I know you’d want keep an eye on Oberon’s daughter. What kind of gossip would you miss out on, otherwise?”

Leanansidhe pursed her lips as if she’d swallowed something sour. “You caught me there, darling. Though you don’t hesitate to rub salt in the wound, do you? I *suppose* I can let you use that trod, but you owe me a favor later, darling.” Leanansidhe sniffed and puffed her cigarette. “I feel I should charge *something* for letting you in on my greatest secret. Especially since I have no interest in the girl’s family. Such a boring lot, except the little boy—he has potential.”

“Done,” I said. “You have your favor. At least from me. Now, will you let us use it or not?”

Leanansidhe snapped her fingers, and Skrae the piskie fluttered down from the ceiling. “Take them to the basement trod,” she ordered, “and guide them to the right door. Go.” Skrae bobbed once and zipped to my shoulder, hiding in my hair. “I will continue to have my spies monitor SciCorp,” Leanansidhe said. “See if they can discern where Virus is moving it to. You should get going, darling.”

I straightened and glanced at Puck, who nodded. “All right, let’s go. Grim, keep an eye on Ironhorse, would you? Make sure he doesn’t go charging the army by himself. We’ll be back soon.” I shook my hair, dislodging the piskie huddled against my neck. “All right, Skrae, take us out of here.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Close to Ice

Our trip back through the Briars was less exciting than our trip in. We saw no dragons, spiders or killer-wasp fey, though truthfully I could've wandered straight into their hive without noticing. My mind was consumed with Ash and my family. Would he really…kill them? Cut them down in cold blood, invisible and unheard? What would I do then?

I pressed a palm to my face, trying in vain to stop the tears. I would kill him. If he hurt Ethan or Mom in any way, I would put a knife through his heart myself, even if I was sobbing my eyes out while I did it. Even if I still loved him more than life itself.

Sick with worry, fighting the despair that threatened to drown me, I didn't see Puck stop until I ran into him, and he steadied me without a word. We had reached the end of the tunnel, where a simple wooden door waited in the thorns a few feet away. Even in the tangled darkness of the Briars, I recognized it. This was the gate that had led me into Faery, all those months ago. This was where it all began, at Ethan's closet door.

Ahead of us, Skrae gave a last buzz and flew back down the tunnel, back to Leanansidhe to give his report, I assumed. There was no going back for me. I reached for the door handle.

"Wait," Puck ordered. I turned back, impatient and annoyed, when I saw the grim severity in his eyes. "Are you ready for this, Princess?" he asked softly. "Whatever lies beyond that door isn't Ash any longer. If we're going to save your family, we can't hold back now. We might have to—"

"I know," I interrupted, not wanting to hear it. My chest tightened, and my eyes started to tear, but I dashed them away. "I know. Let's…let's just do this, all right? I'll figure something out when I see him." And before Puck could say anything else, I wrenched the door open and walked through.

The cold hit me immediately, taking my breath away. It hung in the air as I shivered, gazing around in horror, my stomach twisting so painfully that I felt nauseous. Ethan's bedroom was completely encased in ice. The walls, the dresser, the bookshelf; all covered in a layer of crystal nearly two inches thick, but so clear so I could see everything trapped within. Outside the window, a cold, clear night shone through the glass, the moonlight sparkling lifelessly off the ice.

"Oh, man," I heard Puck whisper behind me.

"Where's Ethan?" I gasped, rushing to his bed. The horrific vision of him trapped in ice, unable to breathe, made me virtually ill, and I nearly threw up at the thought. But Ethan's bed was empty, the quilts flat and still beneath the frozen layer.

"Where is he?" I whispered, near panic. Then I heard a faint noise from beneath the bed, a soft, breathy whimper. Dropping to my knees, I peered into the crack, wary of monsters and bogeys and the things that lurked under the bed. A small, shivering lump stirred in the far corner, and a pale face looked up at mine.

"Meggie?"

"Ethan!" Relieved beyond words, I reached under the bed and pulled him out, hugging him close. He was so cold; he clung to me with frozen hands, his four-year-old body shaking like a leaf.

"You c-came back," he whispered, as Puck crossed the room and shut the door without a sound. "Quick! You have to s-save Mommy and Daddy."

My blood ran cold. "What happened?" I asked, holding him with one arm while pulling open the door we came through. Now it was just a normal closet. I yanked out a quilt that wasn't covered in ice and wrapped Ethan in it, sitting him on the frozen bed.

"*He* came," Ethan whispered, pulling the folds tighter around himself. "The dark person. S-Spider told me he was coming. He told me t-to hide."

"Spider? Who's Spider?"

"The m-man under the b-bed."

"I see." I frowned and rubbed his numb fingers between mine. Why would a bogey be helping Ethan? "What happened then?"

"I hid, and everything turned to ice." Ethan gripped my hand, big blue eyes beseeching mine. "Meggie, Mommy and Daddy are still out there, with him! You have to save them. Make him go away!"

“We will,” I promised. My heart started an irregular thud in my chest. “We’ll make this right, Ethan, I promise.”

“He should stay here,” Puck murmured, peering through a crack in the door. “Man, it looks like the whole house is iced over. Ash is here, all right.”

I nodded. I hated to leave Ethan, but there was no way I wanted my brother to see what came next. “You wait here,” I told him, smoothing down his curly hair. “Stay in your room until I come get you. Close the door and don’t come out, no matter what, okay?”

He sniffled and huddled deeper into the quilt. With my heart in my throat, I turned to Puck. “All right,” I whispered. “Let’s find Ash.”

We crept down the stairs, Puck in front, me clinging to the railing because the stairs were slick and treacherous. The house was eerily silent, an unfamiliar palace of sparkling crystal, the cold so sharp that it cut into my lungs and burned my fingers as they gripped the railing.

We reached the living room, cloaked in shadow except for the light that came from the open door and the flickering static of the television. Silhouetted against the screen, Mom’s and Luke’s heads were visible over the top of the couch. Leaning together, as if asleep, they were frozen solid, encased in ice like everything else. My heart stood still.

“Mom!”

I rushed forward, but Puck grabbed my arm, holding me back. Snarling, I turned on him, trying to shake him off, until I saw his face. His eyes were hard, his jaw set as he pulled me behind him, a dagger appearing in his hand.

Trembling, I looked into the living room again just as Ash melted out of the shadows on the far wall, drawing his sword as he did. In the harsh blue light, he looked awful, his skin split open along his cheekbones and his eyes sunk into his face. There were new wounds over his arms and hands, where the skin had blackened along the openings, looking burned and dead. His silver eyes were bright with pain and madness as he stared at us, every inch a killer, but I couldn’t be afraid of him. There was only grief now, a horrible, soul-wrenching pain knowing that, no matter what happened, I had to let him die. If I wanted to save my family, Puck would have to kill Ash. Tonight. Right here in my living room. I forced down a sob and stepped forward, ignoring Puck as he grabbed for me, my eyes only for the dark prince standing across the room.

“Ash,” I whispered as his eyes flicked to my face, following my every move. “Can you hear me at all? Please, give us something. Otherwise, Puck is going to…” I swallowed hard, as he continued to regard me blankly. “Ash, I can’t let you hurt my family. But…I don’t want to lose you, either.” The tears spilled over, and I faced him desperately. “Please, tell me you can fight this. Please—”

“Kill me.”

I sucked in a breath, staring at him. He stood rock still, the muscles working in his jaw, as if he was struggling to speak. “I…can’t fight this,” he gritted out, closing his eyes in concentration. His arms shook, and his grip on the sword tightened. “You have to…kill me, Meghan. I…can’t stop myself…”

“Ash—”

His eyes opened, glazed over once more. “Get away from me, now!”

Puck shoved me away as Ash leaped across the room, his sword coming down in a sapphire blur. I hit the floor, wincing as the ice scraped my palms and bruised my knees. With my back against the wall, I watched Puck and Ash battle in the middle of the living room, feeling dead inside and out. I couldn’t save him. Ash was lost to me now, and worse, one of them was going to die. If Puck won, Ash would be killed. But if Ash emerged victorious, I would lose everything, including my own life. I guess I should’ve been rooting for Puck, but the cold despair in my heart kept me from feeling anything.

As Ash whirled away from a vicious upward slash, something glittered beneath his hair at the base of his skull. Scrambling to my feet, I narrowed my eyes and my senses, staring at it intently. A tiny spark of cold, iron glamour glimmered at the top of Ash’s spine and I gasped. That was it! The bug, the thing that was controlling him and, ultimately, killing him.

As if it could sense my thoughts, Ash whirled, his eyes narrowing in my direction. As Puck’s knife came down at his back, he spun, knocking it aside, and stabbed forward with his weapon. Puck twisted desperately, but it wasn’t enough, and the icy blade plunged deep into his shoulder. I cried out, and Puck stumbled back, dark blood blossoming over his shirt, his face tight with pain.

Ash lunged at me, and I tensed, my heart hammering in my chest. All those times watching him fight gave me an inkling of what was coming. As the sword came slashing down at my head, I dove forward, hearing the

savage *chink* of the blade against the ice. Rolling away, I glanced back, saw the sword coming and threw myself aside, barely avoiding the second swing that bit into the floor, pelting me with ice shards. I hit the wall and turned back to see Ash standing over me, weapon raised high. There was nowhere to go. I looked into his face, saw his jaw tighten and his arm tremble as he met my gaze. For a split second, the sword wavered, and he closed his eyes…

Just as Puck rose up from nowhere with a snarl and slammed the dagger into his chest.

Time stood still. A scream lodged in my throat as Puck and Ash stared at each other, Puck's shoulders heaving with breaths or sobs, I couldn't tell. For a moment, they stood there, locked in a morbid embrace, until Puck let out a strangled noise and wrenched himself away, yanking out the dagger in a spray of crimson. The sword fell from Ash's hand, hitting the ground with a ringing clang that echoed through the house.

Ash staggered back, managing to stay on his feet for a moment, arms curled around his stomach. He swayed, putting his back to the wall, as dark blood began to drip to the ice, pooling beneath him. As I finally found my voice and screamed his name, Ash raised his head and gave me a weary smile. Then those silver eyes dimmed, like the sun vanishing behind a cloud, and he crumpled to the ground.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sickness

"Ash!"

I rushed forward, shoving Puck out of the way. Puck stumbled aside, moving like a sleepwalker. The bloody dagger dropped limply from his hand. Ignoring him, I lunged toward Ash.

"Stay back!"

His voice brought me up short, sharp and desperate. Ash struggled to his knees, arms around his stomach, shaking with agonized gasps. Blood pooled around him as he raised his head, eyes bright with anguish. "Stay back, Meghan," he gritted out, a line of red trickling from his mouth. "I could…still kill you. Let me be." He grimaced, closing his eyes, one hand clutching at his skull. "I can still…feel it," he rasped, shuddering. "It's in…shock now, but…it's getting strong again." He gasped, clenching his teeth in pain. "Dammit, Goodfellow. You could've…made it clean. Hurry and get it over with."

"No!" I cried, flinging myself down beside him. He flinched away from me, and I caught his shoulder.

It was like touching an electric fence, without the shock. I felt a rush of sharp, metallic glamour coming from Ash, buzzing in my ears and vibrating my senses. I felt something inside me respond, like a current beneath my skin, rushing up to my fingertips, and suddenly everything was much clearer. If glamour was raw emotion and passion, this was the absence of it: logical, calculating, impassive. I felt all my fear, panic and desperation drain away, and I looked at Ash with a new curiosity. This was a problem, but how was I going to fix it? How would I solve this equation?

"Meghan, run." Ash's voice was strangled, and that was all the warning I had before his eyes went glassy and his hands fastened around my throat, cutting off my air. I gasped and clawed at his fingers, staring into his blank eyes as a sharp, droning voice echoed through my head.

Kill you.

I gasped airlessly, fighting to stay calm, to stay connected to that cold, impassive glamour buzzing under my skin. As I stared into his eyes, I could *see* the bug, its hateful glare peering back at me. I could see its round, ticklike body, clamped to the top of Ash's spine, the metal parasite that was killing him. I could hear it, and I knew it could hear me, too.

"Meghan!" Puck snatched the ice sword from where it lay, forgotten, and raised it over his head.

"Puck, don't." My voice came out raspy, but calm. I fought for air and felt Ash's grip loosen the tiniest bit. He closed his eyes, breaking my connection with the bug, but I could still feel the iron glamour, buzzing all around me. He was fighting its commands, his face tight with concentration, sweat running down his skin.

"Do it," he rasped, and I realized he spoke to Puck, not me.

"No!" I met Puck's conflicted gaze, saw the sword waver as he swept it toward Ash. "Puck, don't! Trust me!"

My vision was getting fuzzy. I didn't have much time. Praying Puck would hesitate a little longer, I turned back to Ash, laying my palm against his cheek. "Ash," I said, hoping my mangled voice would get through to him, "look at me, please."

He didn't respond at first, his fingers shaking as he fought the compulsion to crush my throat. When he did look up, the raw anguish, horror and torment on his face was agonizing. But, beyond his pain-filled eyes, I could see the parasite as it tightened its hold on him. My will rose up to meet it, iron glamour swirling around us. I shaped that glamour into a command, and sent it lancing into the metal bug.

Let go, I told it, putting as much force into the words as I could.

It buzzed furiously and clamped down hard, and Ash cried out in agony. His fingers on my throat tightened, crushing my windpipe and turning my world red with pain. I sagged, fighting to stay conscious, seeing darkness crawling along the edge of my vision. *No!* I told it. *I will not lose to you. I will not give him up! Let go!*

The bug hissed again…and loosened its hold, still fighting me all the way. I put my shaking hand against Ash's chest, over his heart, feeling it crash against his ribs. Ash's grip tightened once more, and the world started to go black. *Get out,* I snarled with the last of my strength. *Get out of him, now!*

A crackle and a flash of light, and Ash convulsed, shoving me away. I fell against the cold floor, striking my head against the ice, blackness momentarily blinding me. Fighting for consciousness, I saw a glint of light, of something tiny and metallic, fly up toward the ceiling, and Ash staring at his hands in horror. The metal spark hovered in the air a moment, than zipped toward me with a furious buzz.

Puck's hand shot out, snatching the bug from the air, hurling it to the floor. For a split second, it lay there glinting coldly against the ice. Then his boot smashed down and ground the bug into oblivion.

I struggled upright, breathing hard, waiting for the room to stop spinning. Puck knelt in front of me, one shoulder covered in blood, his whole body tense with concern.

"Meghan." One of his hands smoothed my cheek, rough and urgent. "Talk to me. Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I think so." My voice came out harsh and raspy, and my throat burned like I'd been gargling with razor blades. Something cold and wet dripped onto my knee. I glanced up and saw that the ceiling was beginning to crack and melt. "Where's Ash?"

Puck moved aside, looking grave. Ash was slumped against the wall in the corner, head down, one hand covering his still bleeding ribs. His eyes were open, staring at the floor, at nothing. Heart in my throat, I gingerly approached and knelt beside him, saw him shift, very slightly, away from me.

"Ash." My worry for him, for Ethan, for my family, was a painful knot in my stomach. I longed to help him, but the image of my mom and Luke, frozen on the couch, filled me with dread and fear. If Ash had hurt them, if they were…I could never forgive him. "My mom," I asked, staring into his face. "My stepdad. Did…did you…?"

He gave his head a small shake, a tiny movement in the shadows. "No," he whispered without looking at me, his voice flat and dead. "They're just…asleep. When the ice melts, they should be fine, with no memory of what happened."

Relief bloomed through me, although short-lived. I reached out to touch his arm, and he flinched as if my touch was poison.

"What will you do with me now?" he whispered.

Puck's shadow fell over us. I looked back and saw him holding Ash's sword, a grim, frightening look on his face. For a second, I was afraid

Puck would stab him right there, but he tossed the blade at Ash's feet and turned away. "Think you can walk, Prince?"

Ash nodded without looking up. Puck pulled me reluctantly to my feet and drew me aside. "I'll deal with Ash, Princess," he murmured, holding up a hand to interrupt my protest. "Why don't you check on your brother before we go?"

"Go? Where?"

"I'd say Ash needs a healer, Princess." Puck glanced back at the prince and made a face. "I know I would, if I'd had a metal bug stuck inside my head. Probably screwed him up pretty bad. Luckily, I know a healer not far from here, but we should go *now*."

I looked back at Mom and Luke, at the water slowly dripping from their frozen silhouettes, and yearning twisted my stomach. I missed them, and who knew when I'd see them again. "We can't stay, just a little while?"

"What would you tell them, Princess?" Puck gave me a look that was sympathetic and exasperated at the same time. "The truth? That a faery prince froze the inside of the house in order to draw you here and kill you?" He shook his head, making sense even as I hated him and his logic at that point. "Besides, we need to get his royal iciness to a healer, and soon. Trust me, it's better if your folks never knew you were here."

I gave my parents one last look and nodded slowly. "Right," I sighed. "I was never here. Let me say goodbye to Ethan, at least."

Feeling old inside and out, I retreated up the steps, pausing once to look back. Puck was crouched in front of the Unseelie prince, his lips moving soundlessly, but Ash was looking straight at me, his eyes glimmering slits in the gloom. Biting my lips, I continued on to Ethan's bedroom.

I found him in the hallway, peering out between the railings, the blanket still draped over his shoulders. "Ethan!" I hissed, and he glanced up with big blue eyes. "What are you doing out here? I told you to stay in your room."

"Where's Mommy and Daddy?" he asked as I picked him up, carrying him back to his room. "Did you tell the bad person to go away?"

"They'll be all right," I told him with my own sense of relief. "Ash didn't hurt them, and as soon as the ice melts, they'll be back to normal." Though they would probably wonder why the whole house was wet. The

ice was melting rapidly; I stepped around several puddles as I crossed the hall into his room.

Ethan nodded, gazing at me solemnly as I set him on his bed. “You’re going away again, aren’t you?” he asked matter-of-factly, though his lip trembled and he sniffled, trying to hold back tears. “You didn’t come back to stay with me.”

I sighed, sitting beside him on the frozen bed. “Not yet,” I murmured, smoothing down his hair. “I wish I could. I really do, but…” Ethan sniffled, and I pulled him close. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “There are still some things I have to take care of.”

“No!” Ethan clung to me, burying his face in my side. “You can’t leave again. They won’t take you again. I won’t let them.”

“Ethan—”

“Princesss.” From the darkness under the bed, something latched on to my ankle, claws digging into my skin. I yelped, swinging my feet up onto the mattress, and Ethan gave a startled cry.

“Dammit, bogey!” My sore throat blazed with pain at the outburst, making me even angrier. I leaped off the bed and stalked to Ethan’s dresser, grabbing the flashlight still kept on top. Bogeys hated light, and the white beam of a flashlight could make them flee in terror. “I am so not in the mood for this,” I rasped, flicking on the beam. “You have three seconds to get out of here before I make you leave.”

“Meggie.” Ethan hopped off the bed and padded up, taking my hand. “It’s okay. It’s only Spider. He’s my friend.”

I looked at him, aghast. Since when did bogeys make friends with the kids they terrorized? I didn’t believe it, but a soft slithering sound came from under the bed, and two yellow eyes peered up at me.

“Fear not, Princesss,” it whispered, keeping a wary eye on the flashlight in my hand. “I am here under ordersss. Prince Asssh told usss to watch thisss houssse. It isss under the protection of the Unssseelie Court.”

“*Ash* ordered this? When?”

“Before he came to collect your bargain, Princesss. Before you went back with him to Tir Na Nog.” The thing slithered to the edge of the crack, staying just out of the light. “The child isss in no danger,” it rasped, “and neither are hisss parentsss, though they do not know we are here. Protect thisss houssse and work no missschief on thossse who live here, those are our ordersss.”

“He tells me stories every night,” Ethan said, looking up at me. “Most of them are pretty scary, but I don’t mind. And sometimes there’s a black pony in the front yard, and little man in the basement. Mommy and Daddy don’t see them, either.”

I closed my eyes. The thought of so many Unseelie fey hanging around my house did nothing to ease my nervousness, even if they were claiming to protect my family. “How did you know about Ash?” I finally asked.

“I sssmelled an Iron fey coming, and knew I mussst protect the boy, at leassst,” Spider went on, oblivious to my conflicted feelings. “I pulled him under the bed, where I could hide him better. Imagine my sssurprissse when I dissscovered it wasss Prince Asssh himssself, attacking thisss houssse. He mussst have been posssesssed, or perhapsss it wasss an Iron fey disssguisssed asss the prince. But, I followed my ordersss, and kept the boy sssafe.”

“Well, I’m grateful for that,” I muttered. And then a thought occurred to me, one that I almost didn’t ask about, but couldn’t leave alone. “Have…have my parents…mentioned me? Do they talk about me at all, or wonder where I am?”

“I know nothing of the adultsss, Princesss.”

It didn’t really matter now, but I suddenly wanted to know. Was I still a part of this family, or just a long-forgotten memory? How could I find out without asking Mom and Luke? I snapped my fingers. My bedroom. I had deliberately avoided it until now, unsure if I could handle seeing it turned into an office, or a guest room, proof that Mom had forgotten me. But with Ethan clutching my hand, his blanket trailing behind us, I walked down the hall to my room and pushed the door open.

It was exactly as I remembered it, frozen in ice, familiar and strange at the same time. A lump caught in my throat as I walked inside. Nothing had changed. There was my old stuffed bear sitting on my bed, a birthday present from long ago. My *Naruto* and *Escaflowne* posters were still on the wall. I ran my fingers over my dresser, scanning the photographs between my scattered collection of CDs, now probably ruined. Photos of me, Mom and Ethan. One family picture with Luke. One of me and Beau, our old German shepherd, as a puppy. And a small, single framed picture on my nightstand that I didn’t recognize.

Frowning, I snapped it away from the ice and held it up, staring at the photograph. It was a picture of me as a little kid, no older than Ethan,

being held by an unfamiliar man with short brown hair and a lopsided smile.

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

My knees crumpled, and I sat down on the bed, slush and frigid water seeping through my clothes. I barely felt it. Ethan stood on tiptoes to stare at the frame. "Who's that?" he whispered.

Puck appeared in the doorway, his shirt and hands smeared with blood. "Princess? We should get going. Ash says there's a tatter-colt outside who can give us a ride to the healer." He stopped when he saw my face. "What's wrong?"

I held up the frame. "Recognize him?"

Puck squinted at the photo, then his eyes got wide. "Hell," he muttered. "It's Charles."

I nodded faintly. "Charles," I whispered, pulling the frame back. "I didn't even know him. I don't know how I didn't recognize…" I stopped, remembering an old woman shifting through my mind, scattering memories like leaves, searching for the one she wanted. When we were first searching for Ethan and the Iron King, we'd asked an ancient Oracle, living in New Orleans, to help us find Machina's lair. The Oracle agreed to help us…in exchange for one of my memories. I hadn't given it any thought until now. "That was the exchange, wasn't it?" I asked bitterly, looking at Puck. "The Oracle's payment for helping us. This was the memory she took."

Puck didn't say anything. I sighed, staring at the frame, then shook my head. "Who is he?" I asked.

"He was your father," Puck murmured. "Or, at least, the man you thought was your father. Before you came here, and your mom met Luke. He disappeared when you were six."

I couldn't take my eyes off the strange photo, at the man holding me so easily, both of us smiling at the camera. "You knew who he was," I murmured without looking away. "You knew who Charles was, didn't you? All that time we were at Leanansidhe's, you knew." Puck didn't answer, and I finally tore my gaze from the photo, glaring up at him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"And what would you have done, Princess?" Puck crossed his arms and stared back, unrepentant. "Made a bargain with Leanansidhe? Dragged him

home again, like nothing happened? Do you think your mom would take him back without a second thought?"

Of course she wouldn't. She had Luke now, and Ethan. Nothing would change, even if I did manage to bring Charles home. And the worst part was, I couldn't remember why I'd wanted to.

My mind spun. I was drowning in a torrent of confusing emotions, feeling my world turned upside down. The shock of discovery. Guilt that I didn't recognize my mother's first husband, the man who'd raised me as a child, and worse, couldn't remember anything about him. He was like a stranger on the street. Anger at Puck. He had known all along, and deliberately kept me in the dark. Anger at Leanansidhe. What the hell was she doing with my dad? How did he even get there? And how was I going to get him out?

Did I even want to get him out?

"Princess." Puck's voice broke through my numb trance. I glared poisoned daggers at him and he gave me a weak smile. "Scary. You can rip me to pieces later. His royal iciness isn't looking so good. We have to get him to a healer, now."

Ethan sniffed and clamped himself to my leg, his small body tight with determination. "No!" he wailed. "No, she's not leaving! No!"

I looked at Puck helplessly, torn in several directions and feeling I could scream. "I can't leave him here alone."

"He will not be alone, Princesss," came Spider's voice from under my bed. "We will defend him with our livesss, asss ordered."

"Can you promise me that?"

A soft hiss. "Asss you wisssh. We three of the Unssseelie Court, bogey, tatter-colt, and cluricaun, promissse to look after the Chassse boy until we are told otherwissse by Hisss Highnesss Prince Asssh or Queen Mab hersself."

I still didn't like it, but it was all I could do for now. Once a faery says the word *promise*, it is an ironclad contract. Ethan, however, wailed and clung tighter to my leg. "No!" he cried again, on his way to a rare but intense temper tantrum. "You're not leaving! You're not!"

Puck sighed and placed his palm gently on Ethan's head, murmuring something under his breath. I saw a shimmer of glamour go through the air, and Ethan slumped against my leg, going silent mid-scream. Alarmed,

I scooped him up, but a soft snore came from his open mouth, and Puck grinned.

"Did you really have to do that?" I said, bundling Ethan in the blanket and carrying him back to his room.

"Well, it was either that or turn him into a rabbit for a few hours." Puck was infuriatingly unrepentant as he followed me down the hall. "And I don't think your parents would've appreciated that."

Icy water dripped from the ceiling and ran rivulets down the walls, soaking his toys and stuffed animals. "This isn't going to work," I groaned. "Even if he is asleep, I can't leave him in here. He'll freeze!"

As if on command, the closet door swung open, warm and dark and, most important, dry.

"Come on, Princess," Puck urged as I hesitated. "Make a decision here. We're running out of time."

Reluctantly, I set Ethan's small body in the closet, pulling down several more blankets to make a nest around him. He remained deeply asleep, breathing easily through his nose and mouth, and didn't even stir as I piled the quilts around him.

"You'd better take good care of him," I whispered to the shadows around me, knowing they were listening. After smoothing his hair back one last time, pulling the covers over his shoulders, I finally rose and followed Puck down the stairs.

"I hope Ash doesn't object to us dragging his carcass outside," Puck muttered as we made our way down the steps, getting dripped on every few feet. "I patched him up as best I could, but I don't think he can walk very…" He trailed off as we reached the frozen living room. The front door creaked softly on its hinges, spilling a bar of moonlight across the floor, and Ash was nowhere to be seen.

I flung myself across the room, slipping on slush and ice, and burst onto the porch. Ash's lean silhouette was moving silently across the yard, stumbling every few feet, one arm around his middle. At the edge of the trees, barely visible within the shadows, a small black horse with glowing crimson eyes waited for him.

I leaped down the steps and raced across the yard, my heart pounding in my ears. "Ash!" I cried, and lunged, catching hold of his arm. He flinched and tried shrugging me off, but nearly fell with the effort. "Wait! Where are you going?"

“Back for the scepter.” His voice was dull, and he tried pulling away again, but I clung to him desperately. “Let me go, Meghan. I have to do this.”

“No, you don’t! Not like this.” Despair rose up like a black tide, and I choked back tears. “What are you thinking? You can’t face them all alone. You’ll be killed.” He didn’t move, either to disagree or to shake me off, and my desperation grew. “Why are you doing this?” I whispered. “Why won’t you let us help you?”

“Meghan, please.” Ash sounded as if he was desperately clinging to the last shreds of his composure. “Let me go. I can’t stay here. Not after…” He shuddered and took a ragged breath. “Not after what I did.”

“That wasn’t you.” Releasing his arm, I stepped in front of him, blocking his path. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. Steeling myself, I stepped closer, finding the courage to gently turn his face to mine. “Ash, that wasn’t you. Don’t go blaming yourself—you had no control over this. This is no one’s fault but *hers*.”

His silver eyes were haunted. “It doesn’t excuse what I did.”

“No.” He flinched and tried drawing back, but I held firm. “But that doesn’t mean you should throw your life away because you feel guilty. What would that accomplish?” He regarded me solemnly, his expression unreadable, and my throat ached with longing. I yearned to fling my arms around him and hug him close, but I knew he wouldn’t allow it. “Virus is still out there,” I continued, holding his gaze, “and now we have a real chance to get the scepter back. But we have to do it together this time. Deal?”

He regarded me solemnly. “Is this another contract?”

“No,” I whispered, appalled. “I wouldn’t do that to you again.” He remained silent, staring at me, and I reluctantly let him go, raw desperation tearing at my stomach. “Ash, if you really want to leave, I can’t stop you. But—”

“I accept.”

I blinked at him. “Accept? What—?”

“The terms of our contract.” He bowed his head, his voice somber and grim. “I will aid you until we get the scepter back and return it to the Winter Court. I will stay with you until these terms are fulfilled, this I promise.”

“Is that all it is to you? A bargain?”

“Meghan.” He glanced at me, eyes pleading. “Let me do this. It’s the only way I can think of to repay you.”

“But—”

“So, are we done here?” Puck sauntered up beside me, putting an arm around my shoulders before I could stop him. Ash stiffened, drawing back, and his eyes went cold. Puck looked past him to the tatter-colt, standing in the trees, and raised an eyebrow. “I guess that’s our ride, then.”

The black horse pinned its ears and curled back its lips in a very unhorselike snarl, baring flat yellow teeth at us. Puck snickered. “Huh, I don’t think your friend likes me very much, Your Highness. Looks like you’ll be riding to the healer’s solo.”

“I’ll go with him,” I said quickly, stepping out of Puck’s casual embrace. He blinked at me and scowled as I pulled him aside. “Ash can barely keep his feet,” I whispered, matching his glare. “Someone has to stay with him. I just want to make sure he doesn’t go off on his own.”

He gave me that infuriating smirk. “Sure, Princess. Whatever you say.”

I resisted the urge to punch him. “Just get us to the healer, Puck.” He rolled his eyes and stalked off, glaring at Ash as he swept by. Ash watched him leave without comment, his expression strangely dead.

Turning away, he stumbled over to the tatter-colt, which bent its forelegs and knelt for him so that he could pull himself onto its back with a barely noticeable grimace. A little nervously, I approached the equine fey, which tossed its head and swished its ragged tail but thankfully didn’t lunge or bite. It didn’t kneel for me, however, and I had to scramble onto its back the hard way, settling behind Ash and wrapping my arms around his waist. For a moment, I closed my eyes and laid my cheek against his back, content just to hold him without fear. I heard his heartbeat quicken, and felt a little shiver go through him, but he remained tense in my arms, rigid and uncomfortable. A heaviness settled in my chest, and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

A harsh cry made me glance up. A huge raven swooped overhead, so close that I felt the wind from its passing ruffle my hair. It perched on a branch and looked back at us, eyes glowing green in the darkness, before barking another caw and flapping away into the trees. Ash gave a quiet word to follow, and the tatter-colt started after it, slipping into the woods as silently as a ghost. I turned and watched my house getting smaller and

smaller through the branches, until the forest closed in and the trees obscured it completely.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Healer

We rode for a couple hours while the sky above us turned from pitch black to navy blue to the faintest tinge of pink. Puck kept well ahead of us, flitting from branch to branch until we caught up, then swooping away again. He led us deep into the swamps, through bogs where the tatter-colt sloshed through waist-deep pools of murky water, past huge, moss-covered trees dripping with vines. Ash said nothing as we traveled, but his head hung lower and lower the farther we went, until it was all I could do to hold him upright.

Finally, as the last of the stars faded from the sky, the tatter-colt pushed its way through a cluster of vine-covered trees to find the raven perched atop a rustic-looking shack in the middle of the swamp.

Before the tatter-colt stopped moving, Ash was sliding off its back, crumpling to the misty ground. As soon as he was off, the tatter-colt began tossing its head and bucking, until I half slid, half fell off its back into the mud. Snorting, the colt trotted into the bushes with its head held high and disappeared.

I knelt by Ash, and my heart clenched at how pallid he looked, the abrasions on his face standing out angrily against his pale skin. I touched his cheek and he groaned, but he didn't open his eyes.

Puck was there suddenly, dragging Ash to his feet, grimacing at the pain of his own wound. "Princess," he gritted out, taking the prince's weight, "go wake up the healer. Tell her we've got an iron-sickened prince on our hands. But be careful." He grinned, his normal self once more. "She can be a little cranky before she's had her coffee."

I climbed the rickety wooden steps onto the porch, which creaked under my feet. A cluster of toadstools, growing right out of the wall near the door, pulsed with a soft orange light, and the shack itself was covered

in various moss, lichens and mushrooms of different colors. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

No one answered right away, so I banged again, louder this time. “Hello?” I called, peering through a dusty, curtained window. My raw throat ached, bringing tears to my eyes, but I raised my voice and called out again. “Is anyone there? We need your help! Hello?”

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” yelled an irritable voice on the other side. “Do you people think healers don’t have to sleep, is that it?” Shuffling footsteps made their way to the door while the voice still continued to mutter. “Up all night with a sick catoblepas, but do I get any rest? Of course not, healers don’t need rest. They can just drink one of their special potions and stay up all night, for days on end, ready to jump at every emergency that comes banging on their door at five in the morning!” The door whooshed open, and I found myself staring at empty air.

“What?” snapped the voice near my feet. I looked down.

An ancient gnome stared up at me, her face wrinkled and shriveled like a walnut under a frayed clump of white hair. Barely two feet tall, dressed in a once-white robe with tiny gold glasses on the end of her nose, she glared at me like a furious midget bear, black eyes snapping with irritation.

I felt a stab of recognition. “Ms…. Ms. Stacy?” I blurted out, seeing, for just a moment, my old school nurse. The gnome blinked up at me, then pulled her glasses off and began cleaning them.

“Well now, Ms. Chase,” she said, cementing my hunch. “It has been a while. Last I saw you, you were hiding in my office after that cruel trick that boy played on you in the cafeteria.”

I winced at the memory. That had been the most embarrassing day of my life, and I didn’t want to think about it. “What are you doing here?” I asked, amazed. The nurse snorted and shoved her glasses back atop her nose.

“Your father, Lord Oberon, bade me keep an eye on you with Mr. Goodfellow,” she replied, looking up at me primly. “If you were hurt, I was supposed to heal you. If you saw anything strange, I was to help you forget. I provided Goodfellow with the necessary herbs and potions he needed to keep you from seeing us.” She sighed. “But then, you went traipsing off to the Nevernever to find your brother, and everything

unraveled. Fortunately, Oberon allowed me to keep my job as school nurse, in case you ever came back."

I felt a small prick of anger that this woman had blinded me for so long, but I couldn't think about that now. "We need your help," I said, turning so she could see Puck and Ash coming toward the porch. "My friend has been stabbed, but not only that, he's iron-sick and getting weaker. Please, can you help him?"

"Iron-sick? Oh dear." The gnome peered past me, staring at the two fey boys in the yard, and her eyes got wide behind her glasses. "That…is that…Prince Ash?" she gasped, as the blood drained from her face. "*Mab's* son? You expect me to help a prince of Winter? Have you gone mad? I… no!" She backed through the door, shaking her head. "No, absolutely not!"

The door started to slam, but I stuck my foot in the frame, wincing as it banged my knee. "Please," I begged, shouldering my way through the gap. The nurse glared at me, pursing her lips, as I crowded through the frame. "Please, he could be dying, and we have nowhere else to go."

"I don't make a habit of aiding the Unseelie, Ms. Chase." The nurse sniffed and struggled to close the door, but I wasn't budging. "Let his own take care of him. I'm sure the Winter Court has its share of healers."

"We don't have time!" Anger flared. Ash was getting weaker. He could be dying, and with every second, the scepter got farther away. I bashed my shoulder into the door, and it flew open. The nurse stumbled back, hand going to her chest, as I stepped into the room. "I'm sorry," I told her in my best firm voice, "but I'm not giving you a choice. You *will* help Ash, or things will get very unpleasant in a very short time."

"I won't be bullied by a half-human brat!"

I straightened and towered over her, my head just touching the ceiling. "Oberon *is* my father, you said so yourself. Consider this an order from your princess." When she scowled, her eyes nearly sinking into the creases of her face, I crossed my arms and glared imperiously. "Or, should I inform my father that you refused to help me? That I came to you for aid, and you turned me away? I don't think he'd be too pleased about that."

"All right, all right!" She raised her hands. "I'll get no peace otherwise, I see that now. Bring in the Winter prince. But your father will hear of this, young lady." She turned and shook a finger at me. "He will hear of this, and then we will see who will be the target of his ire."

I felt a small pang of guilt that I had to pull the daddy card like some spoiled rich kid, but it faded as Puck dragged Ash up the stairs. The prince seemed more wraith than flesh now, his skin a sickly gray except for the angry red wounds on his face and arms, where the skin seemed to be peeling off the bones. I shuddered and my heart twisted with worry.

"Put him in here," the nurse ordered, directing Puck to a small side room with a low-lying bed. Puck complied, laying Ash down on the sheets before collapsing into a chair that looked like an enormous mushroom.

The nurse sniffed. "I see the princess has you in on this, too, Robin."

"Don't look at me." Puck smirked and wiped a hand across his face. "I did my best to kill the guy, but when the princess wants something, there's no changing her mind."

I scowled at him. He shrugged and offered a helpless grin, and I turned back to Ash.

"Ugh, he doesn't just smell of iron, he reeks of it," the nurse muttered, examining the wounds on his face and arms. "These burns aren't normal—they've erupted from the inside out. It's almost like he had something metal inside him."

"He did," I said quietly, and the nurse shuddered, wiping her hands. She pulled up Ash's shirt, revealing a layer of gauze that was just beginning to seep blood onto the mattress. "At least the bandaging was done properly," she mused. "Very nice, clean work. Your handiwork, I presume, Goodfellow?"

"Which one?"

"The bandage, Robin."

"Yeah, that was mine, too."

The nurse sighed, bending over Ash, studying the cuts on his face, peeling away the gauze to see the stab wound. Her brow furrowed. "So, let me get this straight," she continued, looking at Puck. "You stabbed Ash, prince of the Winter Court."

"Guilty as charged."

"And, judging by both of your conditions—" her eyes flickered to my throat and Puck's bloody shoulder "—I'm guessing the Winter prince did that to you, as well."

"Right again."

"Which means you were fighting each other." The nurse's eyes narrowed. "Which means he was probably trying to kill you, yes?"

“Well…” I stammered.

“So, why in the name of all that’s sacred do you want me to heal him? Not that I won’t,” she added, holding up her hand, “but what’s to stop him from attacking you again? Or me, for that matter?”

“He won’t,” I said quickly. “I promise, he won’t.”

“Are you planning to use him as a hostage, is that it?”

“No! It’s just—” I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, you will have to tell me later,” the nurse sighed, standing up. “Your friend is very lucky,” she continued, crossing the room to take a porcelain jar off the shelf. “I don’t know how he didn’t die, but he is strong, to survive as long as he did. He must’ve been in terrible pain.” She returned to his side, shaking her head as she knelt beside him. “I can heal his surface wounds, but I don’t know what I can do about the iron sickness. He must recover from that himself. It is better if he returns to Tir Na Nog after this. His body will throw off the sickness faster in his own land.”

“That’s not really an option,” I ventured. The nurse snorted.

“Then I’m afraid he will be quite weak for a long, long time.” She straightened and turned around, staring at us with her hands on her hips. “Now I need to work. Both of you, out. If you’re tired, use the extra bed in the adjoining room, but don’t disturb my other patient. The prince will be fine, but I can’t be tripping over you every few seconds. Go on, now. Get.”

Making shooing motions with her hands, she chased us from the room and slammed the door behind us.

* * *

EVEN EXHAUSTED, I was too worried to sleep. I wandered the healer’s small cabin like a restless cat, checking the door every ten seconds, waiting for it to open. Ash was on the other side, and I didn’t know what was happening to him. I drove Puck and the satyr with the broken leg crazy, drifting from one room to the next, until Puck threatened, only half jokingly, to put a sleeping spell on me if I didn’t relax. To which I threatened, only half jokingly, that I would kill him if he did.

Finally, the door creaked open and the nurse stepped out, bloodstained and weary-eyed, her hair in disarray.

“He’s fine,” she told me as I rushed up, the question on the tip of my tongue. “Like I said before, he’s still weak from the iron-sickness, but he’s

no longer in any danger. Though I must say—" and she glared at me fiercely, "—the boy almost snapped my wrist when I tried sewing his wounds shut. Wretched Unseelie, the only thing they know is violence."

"Can I see him?"

She eyed me over her gold-rimmed glasses, and sighed. "I should tell you no, he needs his rest, but you wouldn't listen to me, anyway. So yes, you can see him, but keep it short. Oh, and Robin," she said, crooking a finger at Puck, "a word."

Puck gave me a grimace of mock terror and followed the nurse from the room. I watched them leave, then slipped quietly into the darkened room, closing the door behind me.

Easing over to his bed, I sat beside him and studied his face. The cuts were still there, but they were faded now, less severe. His shirt was off, and clean bandages wrapped his stomach and torso. His breathing was slow and deep, his chest rising and falling with each breath. I reached down and gently placed a hand over his heart, wanting to touch him, to feel his heartbeat under my fingers. His face was peaceful, free of harsh lines or worries, but even in sleep, he looked a little sad.

Preoccupied with watching his face, I didn't see his arm move until strong fingers curled gently over mine. My stomach leaped as I looked down, seeing my hand trapped within his, and glanced back at his face. His silver eyes were open now, staring at me, his expression unreadable in the darkness. My breath caught in my throat.

"Hi," I whispered, for lack of anything to say. He continued to watch me, unmoving, and I rattled on. "Um, the nurse says you're going to be fine now. You'll be a little sick from the iron, but that should fade with time." He remained silent, his eyes never leaving my face, and my cheeks started to burn. Maybe he just had a nightmare, and I'd startled him by creeping into his room like a stalker. I was lucky he hadn't snapped my wrist like he almost did with the nurse. "Sorry if I woke you," I muttered, attempting to pull back. "I'll let you sleep now."

His grip tightened, stopping me. "Stay."

My heart soared. I looked down at him, wishing I could just melt into him, feel his arms around me. He sighed, and his eyes closed. "You were right," he murmured, his voice nearly lost in the darkness. "I couldn't do it alone. I should have listened to you back in Tir Na Nog."

“Yes, you should have,” I whispered. “Remember that, so that next time you can just agree with whatever I say and we’ll be fine.”

Though he didn’t open his eyes, one corner of his mouth curled, ever so slightly. It was what I was hoping for. For a moment, the barriers had crumbled and we were all right again. I squeezed his hand. “I missed you,” I whispered.

I waited for him to say *I missed you, too,* but he grew very still under my hand, and my heart plummeted. “Meghan,” he began, sounding uncomfortable. “I…I still don’t know if…” He stopped, opening his eyes. “We’re still on opposite sides,” he murmured, his voice tinged with regret. “Nothing changes that, even now. Contract aside, you’re still considered my enemy. Besides, I thought you and Goodfellow—”

I shook my head. “Puck is…” I began, and stopped. What was he? Thinking about him, I suddenly realized I couldn’t say he was just a friend. “Just friends” didn’t kiss each other in an empty bedroom. “Just a friend” wouldn’t make my stomach squirm in weird, fluttery ways when he came through a door. Was this love, this strange, confusing swirl of emotion? I didn’t have the same intense feelings for Puck that I did for Ash, but I did feel something for him. I couldn’t deny that anymore.

I swallowed. “Puck is…” I tried again.

“Is what?”

I spun around. Puck stood in the doorway, a rather dangerous smile on his face, watching us with narrowed green eyes.

“…talking to the nurse,” I said faintly, as Ash released my hand and turned his face away. Puck stared at me, hard and uncomfortable, as if he knew what I was thinking.

“Nurse wants to talk to you,” he said at last, turning away. “Says to leave his royal iciness alone so he can sleep. Better go see what she has to say, Princess, before she starts throwing her coffee mug.”

I glanced down at Ash, but his eyes were closed and he wasn’t looking at me.

A little apprehensive, I approached the kitchen, where the nurse sat at the table with a steaming mug of what was probably coffee, since the whole room smelled like it. The nurse glanced up and waved me to the opposite chair.

“Sit down, Miss Chase.”

I did. Puck joined us, plunking into the seat beside me, munching an apple he'd gotten from who knew where.

"Robin tells me you're going on a dangerous mission after this," she began, cupping her withered hands around the mug, staring into the coffee. "He wouldn't give me details, but that's why you need the Winter prince healthy, so he can help you. Is that right?"

I nodded.

"The problem is, if you go through with this plan, you'll almost certainly kill him."

I jerked up. "What are you talking about?"

"He is very sick, Miss Chase." She glared at me over the rim of her mug, steam writhing off her glasses. "I wasn't joking when I said he'll be weak. The iron was in his system too long."

"Isn't there anything else you can do?"

"Me? No. He needs the glamour of his own realm to heal, so his body can throw off the sickness. Barring that—" she took a sip of coffee "—if you could find a great influx of human emotion, in large quantities, that might help him. At the very least, he could begin to recover."

"Lots of glamour?" I thought a moment. Where would there be a lot of crazy, unrestrained human emotion? A concert or a club would be perfect, but we had no tickets, and I was underage for most clubs. But, as Grimalkin had taught me, that wasn't a problem when you could conjure money from leaves and a valid license from a Blockbuster card. "Puck—think you can sneak us into a club tonight?"

He snorted. "I can sneak us into anything, Princess. Who do you think you're talking to?" He snapped his fingers, grinning. "We can pay a visit to Blue Chaos again, that'll be fun."

The nurse blinked. "Blue Chaos is owned by a Winter sidhe who employs redcaps and is rumored to have an ogre in the basement." She sighed. "Wait. If you insist on doing this, I've a better idea, one not so… insane." She looked caught between reluctance and resignation as she turned to me. "The Winter Formal is tonight at your old school, Miss Chase. If there is one place that is sure to have an overabundance of emotionally charged, hormonal teenagers, that would be it."

"The Winter Formal? Tonight?" My stomach fluttered. Going back to my school would mean facing my former classmates, and all the gossip, rumors and stories that followed. I would have to wear a fancy dress in

front of everyone, maybe even dance, and they would all snicker and laugh and whisper behind my back. *Think of an excuse, Meghan, quick.* "How will we get in? I haven't been to school in forever, and they're likely to be monitoring the tickets to make sure only students attend."

Puck snorted. "Please. How many of these things do you think I've crashed? Tickets?" He sneered. "We don't need no stinkin' tickets."

The nurse shot Puck an annoyed look and turned to me. "Your parents called off the investigation for you a few months ago, Miss Chase," she said solemnly. "I believe the excuse your mother used was that you had come home and that they sent you away to a boarding school out of state. I'm not sure what she told your father—"

"Stepfather," I muttered automatically.

"—but no one has been looking for you for a while," the nurse finished, as if I hadn't said anything. "Your appearance might seem odd at first, but I'm sure Robin can fix it so you aren't conspicuous. Either way, I doubt anyone will remember you."

I wasn't sure about that. "What about a dress?" I argued, still determined to find a loophole. "I don't have anything to wear."

This time, I received scornful looks from both the nurse and Puck. "We can get you a dress, Princess," Puck scoffed. "Hell, I can glamour you a dress made of diamonds and butterflies, if you want."

"That's a little extravagant, don't you think, Robin?" The nurse shook her head at him. "Do not worry, Miss Chase," she told me. "I have friends who can help us in that regard. You will have a beautiful dress for the formal, I promise you that."

Well, that would be a nice sentiment, if I wasn't absolutely terrified. I tried again. "The school is forty-five minutes away," I pointed out, "and I don't have a license. How will we get there?"

"I have a trod that leads directly to my office in the school," the nurse replied, crushing that hope. "We can be there in seconds, and you won't miss a thing."

Damn. I was fast running out of excuses. Desperately, I played my last card.

"What about Ash? Should we move him this soon? What if he doesn't want to go?"

"I'll go."

We all whirled around. Ash stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, looking exhausted but a little better than before. His skin had lost the gray pallor, and the wounds across his face and arms were not as striking. He didn't look good, by any means, but at least he wasn't at death's door.

Ash clenched a fist in front of his face, then let it drop. "I can't fight like this," he said. "I'd be a liability, and our chances of getting the scepter will diminish. If there's a chance for me to shake this off, I'll take it."

"Are you sure?"

He looked at me, and that faint, familiar smile crossed his lips. "I have to be on top of my game if I'm going to kill things for you, right?"

"What you need," the nurse replied, stalking toward him with a steely glint in her eye, "is to go back to bed. I did not spend the last few hours stitching you back together for you to fall apart because you refused to stay down. Go on, now. Back to bed!"

He looked vaguely amused, but let himself be herded back into the room, and the nurse shut the door firmly behind him. "Bullheaded youngsters," she sighed. "Think they're damned invincible." Puck snickered, which was the wrong thing to do.

She whirled around. "Oh, you think it's funny, do you, Goodfellow?" she snapped, and Puck winced. "I happened to notice your shoulder doesn't look well at all. In fact, it's bleeding all over my clean floor. I believe it needs stitches. Follow me, please."

"It's only a flesh wound," Puck said, and the nurse's gaze darkened. Stalking back across the floor, she grabbed him by one long ear and pulled him out of the chair. "Ow! Hey! Ow! Okay, okay, I'm coming! Jeez."

"Miss Chase," the nurse snapped, and I jerked to attention. "While I'm fixing up this idiot, I want you to get some sleep. You look exhausted. Use the empty cot in the patient room, and tell Amano that if he bothers you, I'll break his other leg. After I'm done with Robin, I'll come by with something for your throat."

Doubts still nagged at me, but I nodded. Finding the empty cot, I lay down, ignoring the satyr who invited me to share his "much softer bed." *I'll just lie down for a minute*, I thought, turning my back on Amano. *Just for a minute, and then I'll check on Ash.*

* * *

“COME ON, you sleeping beauty. We’ve got a ball to attend.”

I woke up, embarrassed and confused, staring around blearily. The room was dark; candles flickered erratically, and mushrooms on the walls glowed with a soft yellow luminance. Puck stood over me, grinning as usual, the light casting weird, fluttering shadows over his face.

“Come on, Princess. You slept all day and missed the fun. Our lovely nurse got a few of her friends together to make you a dress. They refuse to show it to me, of course, so you have to march in there and come out wearing it.”

“What are you talking about?” I muttered, before I remembered. The Winter Formal! I was supposed to show up at my old school after being gone for so long, and face all my former classmates. There would be pointing and rumors and whispers behind my back, and my stomach clenched at the thought.

But there was no going back now. If we were going to get the scepter, Ash needed to heal, which meant I had to endure the humiliation and just get on with it.

I trailed Puck out of the room, where the nurse was waiting for me in the hall, a small, pleased smile on her lips. “Ah, there you are, Miss Chase.”

“How’s Ash?” I asked before she could say anything else. With a snort, the nurse turned and beckoned me to follow.

“The same,” she replied, leading me down the hall. We passed Ash’s room, the door tightly closed, and continued without pausing. “The stubborn fool is walking now, and even challenged Robin to a sparring match this afternoon. I stopped them, of course, though Robin was only too happy to fight him, the idiot.”

“Hey,” Puck said behind us. “I’m not the one who offered. I was just doing the guy a favor.”

The nurse whirled and fixed him with a gimlet eye. “You—” she began, then threw her hands up. “Go get ready, idiot. You’ve been hovering at the door like a lost puppy all day. Tell the prince we’ll be leaving as soon as Miss Chase is ready. Now, get.”

Puck retreated, grinning, and the nurse sighed. “Those two,” she muttered. “They’re either best friends or darkest enemies, I can’t tell which. Come with me, Miss Chase.”

She pushed open another door and stepped through, and I followed, ducking my head. We entered a small room with shelves and potted plants encircling the walls, and a sharp, almost medicinal tang filled the room, as if I had wandered into someone's herb garden. Which, I guess, I had. Two other gnomes, as shriveled and wrinkly as the nurse, looked up from three-legged stools and waved cheerfully.

My breath caught. They were working on a dress so gorgeous my mind stumbled to a halt for a moment. A floor-length, blue satin gown hung from a mannequin in the center of the room, rippling like water in the sun. The bodice was embroidered with silvery designs and glittering ribbons of pure light, and a gauzy blue shawl had been draped over the naked shoulders, so sheer that it was almost invisible. A sparkling diamond choker encircled the mannequin's neck, sending prisms of fragmented light across the walls. The entire outfit was dazzling.

I swallowed. "Is that…for me?"

One of the other gnomes, a short man with a nose like a potato, laughed. "Well, the prince certainly isn't going to wear it."

"It's beautiful."

The gnomes preened. "Our ancestors were shoemakers, but we've learned to sew a few other things, as well. This weave is stronger than normal glamour, and won't fray if you happen to touch anything made of iron. Now, come try it on."

It fit perfectly, sliding over my skin as if made for me. I caught a shimmer of glamour out of the corner of my eye as I pulled it on, and deliberately ignored it. If this dress was put together with leaves, moss and spider silk, I didn't want to know.

When I was done, I raised my arms and turned around for inspection. The tailor gnomes clapped like happy seals, and the nurse nodded approvingly.

"Take a look at yourself," she murmured, making a spinning motion with her finger. I turned to see myself in the floor-length mirror that appeared out of nowhere, and blinked in surprise.

Not only was the dress perfect, but my hair was styled into complex curls, my face lightly touched with makeup, making me look older than before. And, whether it was part of the dress's glamour or the nurse's doing, I looked *human* again, without the pointed ears and huge, unnatural

eyes. I looked like a normal teenager, ready for prom. Illusion, I knew, but it still startled me a moment, this tall, elegant stranger in the mirror.

"The boys won't be able to keep their eyes off her," a gnome sighed, and all my fears came rushing back. Fancy dress or no, I was still me, the invisible Swamp Girl of Albany High. Nothing would change that.

"Come," the nurse said, putting a shriveled hand on mine. "It's almost time."

Back we went, through the door into the central room, where a handsome boy in a classic black tuxedo waited for us. I gasped when I saw it was Puck. His crimson hair had been spiked up so it didn't look quite as disheveled, and his shoulders filled out the jacket he wore. I hadn't realized how fit he was. His green eyes raked me up and down, very, very briefly before returning to my face, and he smiled. Not teasing or sarcastic, but a pure, genuine smile.

"Humph," said the nurse, not nearly as shocked as me. "I guess you can clean up when you want to, Robin."

"I try." Puck, looking very human now, crossed the room and reached for my hand, slipping a white corsage onto my wrist. "You look gorgeous, Princess."

"Thanks," I whispered. "You look nice, yourself."

"Nervous?" he asked.

I nodded. "A little. What will I say if someone asks me where I've been? How will I explain what I've done all year, especially after I come waltzing in like nothing has happened? What about you?" I looked up at him. "Won't they wonder where you've been all this time?"

"Not me." Puck's normal grin came flashing back. "I've been gone too long—long enough for anyone to forget that I ever went to high school. The most I'll get is a vague recollection, like déjà vu, but no one will really recognize me." He shrugged. "One of the perks of being me."

"Lucky you," I muttered.

"Are we ready?" the nurse asked, suddenly appearing in her human mien, a short, stout woman in a white lab coat, with lined brown skin and the same gold glasses on the end of her nose. "And if you're wondering, yes, I am coming with you," she announced, peering at us over her glasses, "just to make sure my patient doesn't push himself so hard he collapses. So, are we done here?"

"We're still waiting for Ash."

“Not anymore,” she replied, gazing over my shoulder. I turned slowly, heart pounding against my ribs, not knowing what to expect. For a moment, my mind went completely blank.

I’d daydreamed about Ash in a tuxedo, silly fantasies that crossed my mind every so often, but the image in my head was as far removed as a house cat was to a jaguar. His tuxedo wasn’t black, but a dazzling, spotless white, the open jacket showing a white vest and an icy blue tie beneath. His cuff links, the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and the glittering stud in his ear were the same icy color. Everything else was white, even his shoes, but instead of appearing ghostly or faded, he filled the room with presence, a royal among commoners. He stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, the picture of nonchalance, and even as a human, he was too gorgeous for words. His dark hair had been combed back, falling softly around his face, and his mercury eyes, though they should’ve seemed pale against all the white, glimmered more brightly than anything.

And they were fixed solely on me.

I was unable to move or make a sound. If my knees hadn’t already been locked, I would’ve been a satiny blue puddle on the floor. Ash’s gaze held mine; his eyes didn’t stray from my face, but I felt him looking at all of me, taking me in as surely as Puck had scanned the length of my dress in a glance. I couldn’t stop staring back. Everything around me—noise, colors, people—faded into the ether, losing all relevance and meaning, until it was only me and Ash in the entire world.

Then someone took my elbow, and my heart jolted back to normal.

“Okay,” Puck said a little too loudly, steering me away, “the gang’s all here. Are we going to this party, or not?”

Ash walked up beside me. He made no noise, but I could feel his presence as surely as my own. He didn’t offer his arm or make any move to touch me, but my nerves buzzed and my skin tingled, just with him standing there. I caught a hint of frost and the strange, sharp smell that was uniquely him, and the memory of our first dance together came rushing back.

I didn’t miss the subtle look that passed between Ash and Puck, either. Ash kept his expression carefully blank, but Puck’s mouth twitched in a faint smirk—one of his dangerous ones—and his eyes narrowed a fraction.

The nurse must’ve seen it, too, for she clapped her hands briskly, and I jumped about three feet in the air. “May I remind you three,” she stated in

a no-nonsense voice, “that even though this is a party, we are there for a specific reason. We are not there to spike the punch, seduce the humans, glamour the food, challenge the males to a fight, or do anything pertaining to mischief. Is that understood?” She shot a piercing glare at Puck when she said this, and he pointed to himself with wide-eyed, *who, me?* look. It did not amuse her. “I will be watching you,” she warned, and even though she was barely four feet tall, white-haired, and shriveled like a prune, she made the threat sound ominous. “Do try to behave yourselves.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Winter Formal

It was an eerie feeling, walking the hallways of my school after being gone for so long. Dozens of memories floated through my head as we passed once-familiar landmarks: Mr. Delany's classroom where I'd sat behind Scott Waldron in Classic Lit, the bathrooms I'd spent a lot of time in, crying, the cafeteria where Robbie and I had always eaten together at the last table in the corner. So much had changed since then. The school seemed different somehow, less real than before. Or maybe I was the one who had changed.

Clusters of blue and white balloons led the way to the gym, light and music pouring out from the double doors and windows. My stomach started turning nervous backflips the closer we got, especially when the doors swung open and two students walked out, holding hands and giggling. The boy pulled his date to him for a long, tongue-swabbing kiss, before they broke apart and began creeping behind the building.

"Mmm, smell the lust," Puck muttered beside me. The nurse snorted.

"They're not supposed to leave the gym without supervision," she growled, putting her hands on her hips. "Where are the chaperones? I suppose I'll have to deal with this. You three, behave." She stalked away, virtually bristling with indignation, following the pair around the gym and into the shadows.

The coast was clear. Swallowing my nervousness, I looked back at the boys to see if they were ready. Puck grinned at me, eager as always, mischief written plainly on his face. Ash regarded me with a solemn expression. He looked stronger already, his eyes bright, the cuts healed to just faint, thin scars across his cheeks. Our gazes met, and the depth of emotion smoldering within left me breathless.

"How do you feel?" I asked, to hide the longing I knew must show on my face. "Is this helping at all? Are you getting better?"

He smiled, very faintly. “Save me a dance,” he murmured.

And then we were moving toward the gym. The music grew louder and the din of voices echoed beyond the walls. Puck and Ash each pushed open a door, and we swept through into another world.

The gym had been decorated with more blue and white balloons, crepe paper, and glittering foam snowflakes, though we never saw snow in Louisiana. We passed the ticket booth with a group of teens clustered around it, either buying tickets or waiting in line. No one seemed to notice us as we swept by, but my stomach lurched as I caught sight of a familiar figure, smiling as she handed tickets to another well-dressed couple. Angie the ex-cheerleader stood behind the table, minus the huge pig nose Puck had given her last year in a vengeful prank. She seemed perfectly happy, smiling and nodding as if she did this kind of work every day. I tried to catch her eye as we passed, but her attention was on the line in front of her and the moment was gone.

Beyond the ticket booth, blue and white tables lined one side of the room; only a few people sat there, the unfortunate ones who couldn’t get a date but didn’t want to miss the formal just because they were single.

Where I would be, I thought, *if I hadn’t been pulled into Faery. Or, more than likely, I wouldn’t have been here in the first place. I’d have been home, with a movie and a half-pint of ice cream.*

The room’s other half was a sea of swirling gowns and tuxedos. Couples swayed to the music, some dancing casually with their partners, some so welded together you’d need a crowbar to pry them apart. Scott Waldron, my old crush, had his arms around a stick-thin blonde I recognized as one of the cheerleaders, his hands sliding below her waist to fondle her rear. I watched them dance, their hands roaming all over each other, and felt nothing.

And then the murmurs began, starting from the table where the Dateless sat, spreading to the dance floor and the corners of the room. People were staring at us, shooting furtive glances over their dates’ shoulders, heads bent low to whisper to each other. My face burned and my steps faltered, wanting to beat a hasty retreat from the room to the nearest bathroom stall. Mr. Delany, my old English teacher, looked up from where he stood guard over the punch bowl and frowned. Breaking away from the table, he strode toward us, squinting through his thick glasses. My heart pounded, and I turned to Puck in a panic.

“Mr. Delany is coming toward us!” I hissed. Puck blinked and looked over my shoulder.

“Huh, it is old Delany. Jeez, he’s gotten fat. Hey, remember the time I put itching powder in his toupee?” He sighed dreamily. “That was a good day.”

“Puck!” I glared at him. “Help me out here! What do I say? He knows I haven’t been in school for months!”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Delany said, right behind me, and my heart nearly stopped. “Is that…Meghan Chase?” I turned to him with a sickly smile. “It *is* you. I thought so.” He gaped at me. “What are you doing here? Your mother told us you were at a boarding school in Maine.”

So that’s where I’ve been all this time. Nice cover, Mom. “I’m…uh… home for Christmas vacation,” I answered, saying the first thing that came to mind. “And I wanted to see my old school one more time before I went back.”

Mr. Delany frowned. “But, Christmas vacation was several…” He trailed off suddenly, a glazed look coming over his face. “Christmas vacation,” he murmured. “Of course. How lovely for you. Will you be coming back next year?”

“Um.” I blinked at his sudden change of mood. “I don’t know. Maybe? There’s still a lot of things to work out.”

“I see. Well, it was nice to see you, Meghan. Enjoy the dance.”

“See you, Mr. Delany.”

As he wandered back toward the punch bowl, I breathed a sigh of relief. “That was a close one. Nice save, Puck.”

“Huh?” Puck frowned at me. “What do you mean?”

“The charm spell?” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Come on, you didn’t cast that?”

“Not me, Princess. I was about to turn his wig into a ferret, but then he went all sleepy-eyed before I could pull it off.” Puck sighed, gazing at the retreating English teacher in disappointment. “Pity, really. That would’ve livened up the party. There’s so much glamour here, it’s a shame not to use it.”

I looked over his shoulder. “Ash?”

The Winter prince gave me a faint smile. “Subtlety has never been Goodfellow’s forte,” he murmured, ignoring Puck’s scowl. “We’re not

here to cause a riot. And human emotions have always been easy to manipulate."

Like mine were? I wondered as we continued across the gym floor. *Did you just cast a charm spell to manipulate my emotions, like Rowan tried to do? Are my feelings for you real, or some sort of fabricated glamour? And do I even care if they are?*

At the tables, Puck stepped in front of me and bowed. "Princess," he said formally, though his eyes were twinkling as he held out a hand. "May I have the honor of the first dance?"

"Um." For a moment, I balked at the idea, on the verge of telling Puck that I couldn't dance. But then I felt Ash's gaze, reminding me of a moonlit grove and swirling around the dance floor with the Unseelie prince as scores of faeries looked on. *You're Oberon's blood,* his deep voice murmured in my head. *Of course you can dance.*

Besides, Puck wasn't exactly giving me a choice. Taking my hand, he led me toward the floor. I glanced at Ash in apology, but the prince had moved to a dark corner and was leaning against the wall, looking out over the sea of faces.

And then we were dancing.

Puck danced very well, though I don't know why this surprised me. He probably had loads of experience. I stumbled a few times at first, then closed my eyes and imagined my first dance with Ash. *Stop thinking,* Ash had told me that night as we swirled across the floor in front of several dozen fey. *The audience doesn't matter. The steps don't matter. Just close your eyes and listen to the music*. I remembered that dance, the way I'd felt with him, and the steps came easily once more.

Puck gave a soft chuckle. "Okaaaay," he murmured as we spun around the room, "I seem to remember a certain someone swearing that she couldn't dance at all. Obviously I must've been with her twin sister, because I was expecting you to step on my toes all night. Been taking lessons, Princess?"

"Oh…um. I sort of picked it up while I was in the Nevernever." *Not entirely a lie.*

As we moved around the dance floor, I caught glimpses of Ash, standing alone in the corner with his hands in his pockets. It was too dark to see the emotion on his face, but his gaze never left us. Then Puck pulled me into a twirl, and I lost sight of him for a moment.

The next time I glanced in Ash's direction, he wasn't alone. Three girls, one of them the skinny blonde who had been melded to Scott a few minutes ago, had trapped him and were very obviously flirting. Smiling coyly, they oozed close, flipping their hair and giving him sultry looks from beneath their lashes. My hand fisted on Puck's lapel. It took all my willpower not to stomp over and tell them to back the hell off, but what right did I have? Ash wasn't mine. I didn't have any claim to him.

Besides, he would probably just ignore them, or tell them to go away. But when I peeked at the corner again, I saw Ash smiling at the girls, achingly handsome and charming, and my stomach roiled. He was *flirting* with them.

The song came to an end and Puck drew back, frowning slightly, as though he knew my heart wasn't in it anymore. I fanned myself with both hands, feigning breathlessness, but really drying the tears that stung my eyes. Ash was still there in the corner, chuckling at something one of the girls had said. My throat closed up, and my chest felt tight.

"You okay, Princess?"

I wrenched my gaze from Ash and the girls, swallowing hard. "A little hot," I confessed, smiling as we edged our way off the dance floor, back to the tables. "And maybe a little dizzy." Puck chuckled, his old self again, and pulled out a chair for me.

"Sorry. I just have that effect on people." I smacked his stomach with the back of my hand as I sat down, and he grinned. "Hang on. I'll get you something to drink." He vanished into the crowd, making his way toward the refreshment table at the far wall. I hoped he wouldn't spike the punch with something that would turn everyone into frogs. Sighing at the thought, I let my gaze wander around the gym, deliberately keeping it from straying to the far corner.

"Hey." A body moved across my vision, blocking my view. A wide-shouldered body, in a perfectly tailored black tux. I glanced up past the vest and lapels and bow tie, and met Scott Waldron's smiling gaze.

"Hi," he greeted cheerfully, as my stomach did a backflip. Was I seeing this right? Was *Scott Waldron*, football jock extraordinaire, talking to me? Or was this another of his tricks, meant to embarrass and humiliate me, just like last time? I had to admit, he was still really cute—wide shoulders, wavy blond hair, adorable smile—but the memory of the entire cafeteria,

roaring with laughter at my expense dampened my enthusiasm a bit. He wouldn't play me like that, ever again.

"Uh, hi," I returned cautiously.

"I'm Scott," he went on in the confident, self-assured way of someone who was used to being admired. "I haven't seen you around school before. You must go somewhere else, right? I'm the varsity quarterback for Albany High."

He didn't even recognize me. I didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed. Would he be talking to me now if he knew who I was? Would he remember the shy, geeky Swamp Girl who'd crushed on him for two years and waited by his locker every day just to watch him pass her in the hall? Did he ever regret the horrible prank he'd pulled all those months ago?

"You wanna dance?" he asked, holding out his big, football-callused hand.

I glanced toward the drinks table to see that Puck had been cornered by the nurse, who, from his half annoyed, half contrite expression, appeared to have caught him doing some kind of mischief. Probably spiking the punch, exactly as I'd feared.

A high-pitched giggle came from the corner I wasn't looking at, and my stomach turned.

"Sure," I answered, putting my hand in his. If he heard the bitterness in my voice, he didn't let on as we swept out to the dance floor.

Scott put his hands very low on my waist as we swayed to the music, standing closer than I was really comfortable with, but I didn't protest. Here I was, me, Meghan Chase, dancing with the esteemed Golden Boy of Albany High. I tried to be excited; a year ago, I would've given *anything* for Scott to look at me and smile. Had he asked me to dance, I probably would have fainted. But now, feeling his hands on my hips, seeing his face not six inches from mine, I thought only that Scott seemed very young. Still handsome and charming, there was no mistaking that, but the intense fluttery feeling I used to get whenever I looked at him was gone.

"So," Scott murmured, running his hands up my back. I shifted uncomfortably, but at least they didn't slide in the opposite direction. "Did I mention I'm the varsity quarterback already?"

"You did." I smiled at him.

"Oh, right." He grinned back, wrapping a curl of my hair around his finger. "Well, have you ever been to any of my games?"

“A few.”

“Yeah? Pretty impressive, huh? Think we have a chance to make Nationals this year?”

“I really don’t know much about football,” I admitted, hoping he would drop the subject. Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say. He immediately launched into a full explanation of the sport, citing all the games he’d won, his teammate’s flaws and shortcomings, and all the years he’d carried the team to victory. That led to his plans for college, how he’d gotten a scholarship to Louisiana State, how he’d been voted Most Likely to Succeed, and the brand-new Mustang his dad bought him just because he was so proud. I plastered a smile to my face, made appropriate noises of appreciation, and tried not to let my eyes glaze over.

“Hey,” he said at last, as I secretly hoped he was wrapping up, “you wanna get out of here? I’m meeting a bunch of people at Brody’s house later—his old man is out of town, and there’s gonna be a party after the dance. Wanna come?”

Another shock. Scott was inviting me to a cool kids’ party, where there would be drinking, drugs and other activities parents frowned upon. For just a moment, I felt a twinge of regret. The one night I got invited to a party would be the one night I couldn’t go.

“I can’t,” I told him. “I’m sorry, I have other plans tonight.”

He pouted. “Really?” he said, and his hands slid past my hips, definitely farther than I was comfortable with. “You can’t break them, even for me?”

I stiffened, and he actually seemed to get the hint, sliding them back into neutral territory. “I’m sorry,” I said again. “But I really can’t. Not tonight.”

He sighed in genuine regret. “All right, mystery girl, break my heart.” Taking my hand, he pressed it to his chest and gave me a coy, little-boy smile. “But at least let me call you this weekend. What’s your name?”

And there it was.

I could tell him. I could tell him, and watch the smile fade from his lips as he realized whom he’d been seducing so earnestly. Watch that cocky grin turn to horror and disbelief, and maybe just a little regret. I wanted to see regret. He deserved it, after what he’d done to me. I just had to say two words, two simple words, *Meghan Chase*, and the Golden Boy of Albany High would be laid lower than the bottom of my heels.

All I had to do was say my name.

I sighed, softly patted his chest, and whispered, “Let’s keep it a mystery, okay?”

“Uh…” The grin faltered, and he blinked, looking so confused that I almost laughed out loud. “Okay. But…how will I get in touch with you? How will I know who to call?”

“Excuse me.”

My stomach fluttered. I felt the smile stretching my face even before we turned around, though I tried to look severe and angry. It was no use. Ash stood there under the dim lights, solemn and beautiful as he extended his hand to me. “May I cut in?”

Knowing Scott, I expected him to refuse, to tell the competition to back off. But perhaps he was still off balance, or maybe it was something in the prince’s steady gaze that made him take a step back. Still looking a bit confused, like he didn’t know what had just happened, he wandered off the dance floor and into the crowd. And I suddenly had the feeling that would be the last time I ever saw Scott Waldron.

I suppose I should’ve been happy, but all I felt was relief that he was gone. Ash smiled at me, and I forgot to be angry, forgot to be distant and coy and aloof as I’d planned. Instead, I took his hand and let him draw me close, breathed in the frosty scent of him, and was whisked away to our first dance under the stars, the first time I held his hand, looked into his eyes, and was completely lost.

Dancing with Ash was exactly how I remembered it.

The song was slow and sweet, so we swayed back and forth, barely moving, but the look on his face, the feel of his hand on mine, was all heart-achingly familiar. I laid my head on his chest and closed my eyes, content to touch him, to listen to his heartbeat. He sighed and rested his chin atop my head, and for a moment, neither of us spoke; we just swayed to the music.

Until I decided to be an idiot and open my mouth.

“So, you seemed to be enjoying yourself back there.” I couldn’t keep the accusation from my voice, even though I hated myself for sounding like a freaky-possessive girlfriend. “Those girls found you very interesting, I suppose. What were you talking about?”

He chuckled, sending a tingle down my spine. He laughed so infrequently, and it was a deep, marvelous sound when he did. “They

invited me to a party after the dance," he murmured, pulling back to look at me directly. "I told them I was already with someone, so they spent the next few minutes trying to convince me to…ditch?…whomever I was with and join them. It was a rather interesting conversation."

"You could've just told them to go away." I'd seen that cold, *don't-bother-me-or-I'll-kill-you* glare. No one in their right mind would continue pestering the Ice prince once that chilling gaze was turned on them.

"That wouldn't have been very gentlemanly." Ash sounded amused. "And it was advantageous for me to have them stay. There was enough glamour in that one corner to choke a dragon. Isn't that why we're here?"

"Oh." Relief and embarrassment colored my face. "Right. It is. I just thought…never mind. I'll shut up now."

Ash looked down at me, cocking his head with a puzzled frown. "What exactly are you accusing me of, Meghan Chase?"

"I wasn't accusing." I hid my face in his shirt, mumbling through the cool fabric. "I just thought…with how easy it is to manipulate human emotions…that you, I don't know. Might find something more interesting than me."

Wow, that had come out stupid and psycho possessive. My face burned even more. I kept my head down so he wouldn't see my crimson cheeks, and I wouldn't have to see his reaction either.

"Ah." Ash brushed my cheek with the back of his hand, catching a loose strand of hair between his fingers. "I've seen thousands of mortal girls," he said softly, "more than you could ever count, from all corners of your world. To me, they're all the same." His finger slid below my chin, tilting my head up. "They see only this outer shell, not who I really am, beneath. You have. You've seen me without the glamour and the illusions, even the ones I show my family, the farce I maintain just to survive. You've seen who I really am, and yet, you're still here." He brushed his thumb over my skin, leaving a trail of icy heat. "You're here, and the only dance I want is this one."

My heart skipped a beat. His nearness was overwhelming, his face and lips just inches away. We stared at each other, and I could see the hunger in his eyes. I trembled in anticipation, my lips aching to touch his, but a flicker of regret crossed his face and he silently drew back, ending the moment. Sighing, I laid my head against his shirt, my entire being buzzing

with thwarted hope, a heavy disappointment settling in my chest. I heard his heart thudding against my cheek, and felt him tremble, too.

"Since we're on the subject," Ash murmured after a few minutes of silent dancing, as our hearts and minds composed themselves, "you never answered my question."

He sounded uncharacteristically unsure. I shifted in his arms and looked up, meeting his gaze. "What question?"

His eyes were deep gray in the dim light. Glamour shimmered around him, heavy in the air and in the dreams of those around us. For just a moment, the illusion of the human boy dancing with me wavered, revealing an unearthly faery with silver eyes, glamour pouring off of him in waves. Compared to the suddenly plain human dancers surrounding us, his beauty was almost painful.

"Do you love him?"

My breath caught. For the barest of seconds, I thought he meant Scott, but of course that wasn't right. There was only one person he could mean. Almost against my will, I glanced behind me, through the swaying crowd of dancers, to where Puck stood at the edge of the light. His arms were crossed, and he was watching us with narrowed green eyes.

My heart skipped a beat. I turned back, feeling Ash's gaze on me, my mind spinning several directions at once. *Tell him no,* it whispered. *Tell him Puck is just a friend. That you don't feel anything for him.*

"I don't know," I whispered miserably.

Ash didn't say anything. I heard him sigh, and his arms tightened around me, pulling us closer together. We fell silent again, lost in our own thoughts. I closed my eyes, wanting time to freeze, wanting to forget about the scepter and the faery courts and make this night last forever.

But of course, it ended much too soon.

As the last strains of music shivered across the gym floor, Ash lowered his head, his lips grazing my ear. "We have company," he murmured, his breath cool on my skin. I opened my eyes and looked around, peering through the heavy glamour for invisible enemies.

A pair of slitted golden orbs stared at me from a table, floating in midair above the flowery centerpiece. I blinked, and Grimalkin appeared, bushy tail curled around himself, watching me. No one else in the room seemed to notice a large gray cat sitting in the middle of the table; they moved around and past him without a single glance.

Puck met us at the edge of the dance floor, indicating he'd seen Grimalkin too. Casually, we walked up to the table, where Grimalkin had moved on to grooming a hind leg. He glanced up lazily as we approached.

"Hello, Prince," he purred, regarding Ash through half-lidded eyes. "Nice to see you are not evil…well…you know. I assume you are here for the scepter, as well?"

"Among other things." Ash's voice was cold; fury rippled below the surface, and the air around him turned chilly. I shivered. He didn't just want the scepter; he was out for revenge.

"Did you find anything, Grim?" I asked, hoping the other students wouldn't notice the sudden drop in temperature. Grimalkin sneezed once and stood, waving his tail. His gold eyes were suddenly serious.

"I think you had best see this for yourself," he replied. Leaping off the table, he slipped through the crowds and out the door. I took one last look around the gym, at my old classmates and teachers, feeling a twinge of sadness. I'd probably never see them again. Then Puck caught my gaze with his encouraging smile, and we followed Grimalkin out the doors into the night.

Outside, it was bitingly cold. I shivered in my thin gown, wondering if Ash's mood could spread to the entire district. Ahead of us, Grimalkin slipped around a corner like a furry ghost, barely visible in the shadows. We followed him down the corridors, past numerous classrooms, and into the parking lot, where he stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, gazing out over the blacktop.

"Oh, my God," I whispered. The entire lot—pavement, cars, the old yellow bus in the distance—was covered with a fine sheeting of white powder that sparkled under the moonlight. "No way. Is that…*snow?*" I bent and scooped up a handful of the white drifts. Wet, cold and crumbly. It couldn't be anything else. "What's going on? It never snows here."

"The balance is off," Ash said grimly, gazing around the alien landscape. "Winter is supposed to hold the power right now, but with the scepter gone, the natural cycle is thrown off. So you get events like this." He gestured to the snowy parking lot. "It will only get worse, unfortunately."

"We have to get the scepter back now," I said, looking down at Grimalkin. He gazed back calmly, as if snow in Louisiana was perfectly normal. "Grim, did you and Ironhorse find anything yet?"

The cat made a great show of licking his front paw. “Perhaps.”

I wondered if Ash and Puck ever felt the urge to strangle him. Apparently, I wasn’t asking the right questions. “What did you find?” Puck asked, and Grimalkin finally looked up.

“Maybe the scepter. Maybe nothing.” He flicked his paw several times before continuing. “But…there is a rumor on the streets of a great gathering of Iron fey in a factory in downtown San Jose. We located it, and it looks abandoned, so perhaps Virus has not gathered her army yet.”

“Where’s Ironhorse?” I asked.

Ash narrowed his eyes.

“I left him at the factory,” Grimalkin said. “He was ready to charge in, but I convinced him I would return with you and Goodfellow. He is still there, for all I know.”

“You left him *alone?*”

“Is that not what I just said, human?” Grimalkin narrowed his eyes at me, and I gave the boys a panicked look. “I suggest you hurry,” he purred, looking out over the parking lot. “Not only is Virus gathering a great army of Iron fey, but I do not think Ironhorse will wait very long. He seemed rather eager to charge in by himself.”

“Let’s go,” I said, glancing at Ash and Puck. “Ash, are you all right for this? Will you be able to fight?”

He regarded me solemnly and made a quick gesture with his hand. The glamour fell away, the tuxedo dissolving into mist, as the human boy disappeared and the Unseelie prince took his place, his black coat swirling around him.

I looked back at Puck and saw his tux replaced with his normal green hoodie. He gave me a once-over and grinned. “Not exactly dressed for battle, are you, Princess?”

I looked down at my gorgeous dress, feeling a pang of regret that it would probably be ruined before the night was out. “I don’t suppose I have time to change,” I sighed.

“No.” Grimalkin twitched an ear. “You do not.” He shook his head and glanced skyward. “What time is it?”

“Um…I don’t know.” I’d long given up wearing a watch. “Almost midnight, I think. Why?”

He appeared to smile, which was rather eerie. “Just sit tight, human. They will be here soon.”

“What are you talking…” I trailed off as a cold wind whipped across the parking lot, swirling the snow into eddies, making them dance and sparkle over the drifts. The branches rattled, an unearthly wailing rising over the wind and trees. I shivered, and saw Ash close his eyes.

“You called *Them,* caith sith?”

“They owed me a favor,” Grimalkin purred, as Puck glanced nervously at the sky. “We do not have the time to locate a trod, and this is the fastest way to travel from here. Deal with it.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, as both Ash and Puck moved closer, tense and protective. “Who’d he call? What’s coming?”

“The Host,” Ash murmured darkly.

“What…” But at that moment I heard a great rushing noise, like thousands of leaves rustling in the wind. I looked up and saw a ragged cloud moving toward us at a frightening speed, blotting out the sky and stars.

“Hang on,” Puck said, and grabbed my hand.

The black mass rushed toward us, screaming with a hundred voices. I saw dozens of faces, eyes, open mouths, before it was upon us, and I cringed back in fear. Cold, cold fingers snatched at me, bearing me up. My feet left the ground in a rush, and I was hurtling skyward, a shriek lodging in my throat. Icy wind surrounded me, tearing at my hair and clothes, numbing me to all feeling except a small spot of warmth where Puck still held my hand. I closed my eyes, tightening my grip as the Host bore us away into the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ironhorse's Choice

I don't know how long the Host carried us through the sky, screeching and wailing in their unearthly voices. I don't know if they had trods that let them move between worlds, if they could bend space and time, or if they just flew really, really fast. But what should have been hours felt like only minutes before my feet hit solid ground and I was falling forward.

Puck's grip on me tightened, jerking me to a halt before I could fall over. I clutched his arm to regain my balance, looking around dizzily.

We stood on the outskirts of an enormous factory. Across a bright parking lot, lit with neat rows of glowing streetlamps, a huge glass, steel and cement monstrosity loomed at the edge of the pavement. Though the lot was empty, the building itself didn't look damaged in any way: no smashed windows, no graffiti streaking the sides. I caught glimpses of things moving along the walls, flashes of blue light, like erratic fireflies. A moment later, I realized they were gremlins—hundreds, if not thousands of them—scuttling over the factory like ants. The blue lights were the glow of their fangs, hissing, shrieking and baring teeth at each other. A chill ran through me, and I shivered.

"A gremlin nest," Grimalkin mused, watching the swarm curiously. "Leanansidhe said the gremlins congregate in places that have a lot of technology. It makes sense Virus would come here, too."

"I know this place," Ash said suddenly, and we all looked at him. He was gazing at the plant with a small frown on his face. "I remember Virus talking about it when I…when I was with her." The frown grew deeper, and a shadow crept over his face. He shook it off. "There's supposed to be a trod to the Iron Kingdom inside."

Puck nudged my arm and pointed. "Look at that."

I followed his finger to a sign at the front of the building, one of those big marble slabs with giant glowing words carved into it. "SciCorp

Enterprises," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Coincidence?" Puck waggled his eyebrows. "I think not."

"Where's Ironhorse?" I asked, looking around.

"This way," Grimalkin said, trotting along the edge of the parking lot. We followed, the boys slightly blurred at the edges, telling me they were invisible to humans, and me in my very conspicuous prom dress and heels that were so not useful for raiding a giant factory, or even walking down a sidewalk. To my right, cars zoomed past us on the street; a few slowed down to honk at me or whistle, and my cheeks burned. I wished I could glamour myself invisible, or at least have had time to change into something less cumbersome.

Grimalkin led us around the factory, skirting the edges of the sidewalk, to a drainage ditch that separated one lot from the other. At the bottom of the ditch, oily black water pooled from a massive storm drain, trickling through the weeds and grass. Bottles and cans littered the ground, glinting in the moonlight, but there was no sign of Ironhorse.

"I left him right here," Grimalkin said. Looking around briefly, he leaped to a dry rock and began shaking his paws, one by one. "We appear to be too late. It seems our impatient friend has already gone inside."

A deep snort cut through the air before I could panic. "HOW FOOLISH DO YOU THINK I AM?" Ironhorse rumbled, bending low to clear the rim of the pipe. He was in his more human form, as there was no way he could have fit his real body inside. "THERE WAS A PATROL COMING, AND I WAS FORCED TO HIDE. I DO NOT BREAK THE PROMISES I GIVE." He glared at Grimalkin, but the cat only yawned and started washing his tail.

Ash stiffened, and his hand went casually to his sword hilt. I didn't blame him. Barring his brief stint with Virus, the last Ash had seen of Ironhorse, he was dragging us to Machina in chains. Of course, Ironhorse was wearing a different form now, but you had only to look closely to see the huge, black iron monster that lurked beneath the surface.

I switched to the problem at hand, not oblivious to the dark look he was receiving from Ash. "We're sure Virus is in there?" I asked, subtly moving between them. "So, how are we going to get inside, especially with the gremlins crawling all over the building?"

Ironhorse snorted. "THE GREMLINS WILL NOT BOTHER US, PRINCESS. THEY ARE SIMPLE CREATURES. THEY LIVE FOR

CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION, BUT THEY ARE COWARDLY AND WILL NOT ATTACK A POWERFUL OPPONENT.”

“I’m afraid I have to disagree,” Ash said, a dangerous edge to his voice now. “You yourself lead an army of gremlins in Machina’s realm, or have you forgotten? They don’t attack powerful opponents? I seem to recall a wave of them trying to tear me apart in the mines.”

“That’s right,” I echoed, frowning. “And what about the time the gremlins kidnapped me and hauled me off to meet you? Don’t tell me the gremlins aren’t dangerous.”

“NO.” Ironhorse shook his head. “LET ME CLARIFY. BOTH TIMES, THE GREMLINS WERE UNDER MACHINA’S COMMAND. LORD MACHINA WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD CONTROL THEM, THE ONLY ONE THEY EVER LISTENED TO. WHEN HE DIED, THEY REVERTED TO THEIR NORMAL, FERAL STATE. THEY ARE NO THREAT TO US, NOW.”

“What about Virus?” Puck asked.

“VIRUS SEES THEM AS VERMIN. EVEN IF SHE COULD CONTROL THEM, SHE WOULD RATHER LET HER DRONES DO THE WORK THAN STOOP TO DEALING WITH ANIMALS.”

“Well, this should be easy, then.” Puck smirked. “We’ll just stroll in the front door, waltz up to Virus, grab the scepter, have some tea and save the world before breakfast. Silly me, thinking it would be hard.”

“What I think Puck is trying to say,” I said, shooting Puck a frown, “is—what will we do about Virus when we find her? She’s got the scepter. Isn’t it supposed to be powerful?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Ash’s voice raised the hairs on my neck. “I’ll take care of Virus.”

Puck rolled his eyes. “Very nice, Prince Cheerful, but there is one problem. We have to get inside first. How do you propose we do that?”

“You’re the expert.” Ash glanced at Puck, and his mouth twitched into a smirk of his own. “You tell me.”

Grimalkin sighed and rose, his tail lashing his flanks. “The hope of the Nevernever,” he said, eyeing each of us disdainfully. “Wait here. I will check the place out.”

* * *

HE HADN'T BEEN GONE LONG when Puck stiffened and Ash jerked up, his hand going to his sword. "Someone's coming," he warned, and we scrambled into the ditch, my gown catching on weeds and jagged pieces of glass. Sloshing into the pipe, I grimaced as the cold, filthy water soaked my shoes and dress. At this rate, it wouldn't survive the night.

Two figures marched past our hiding spot, dressed in familiar black armor with spines growing from the shoulders and back. The faint smell of rot and putrefying flesh drifted into the tube at their passing. I stifled a cough and put my hand over my nose.

"Rowan's Thornguards," Ash murmured grimly as the pair moved on. Frowning, Puck peeked over his shoulder.

"Wonder how many are in there?"

"I'd guess a few squads at least," Ash replied. "I imagine Rowan wanted to send his best to take over the realm."

"You are right," Grimalkin said, suddenly materializing beside us. He perched on a cinder block so as not to touch the water, keeping his tail straight up. "There are many Thornguards inside, along with several Iron fey and a few dozen human drones. And gremlins, of course. The factory is crawling with them, but no one seems to pay them much attention."

"Did you see Virus or the scepter?" I asked.

"No." Grimalkin sat down, curling his tail tightly around his feet. "However, there are two Thornguards stationed at a back door who will not let anyone past."

At Virus's name, Ash narrowed his eyes. "Can we fight our way through?"

"I would not advise it," Grimalkin replied. "It appears some of them are using iron weapons—steel swords and crossbows with iron bolts and such. It would only take one well-placed shot to kill you."

Puck frowned. "Fey using iron weapons? You think Virus has them all bugged?"

"Something far worse, I'm afraid." Ash's face was like stone as he stared at the factory. "I was forced into service. Virus didn't give me a choice. The Thornguards are acting on their own. Like Rowan. They want to destroy the Nevernever and give it to the Iron fey."

Puck's eyebrows shot up. "*The hell?* Why?"

"Because they think they can become like Virus," I replied, thinking back to what Edgebriar had said, remembering the crazed, doomed look in

his eye. “They believe it’s only a matter of time before Faery fades away entirely. So the only way to survive is to become like the Iron fey. They wear a metal ring beneath their gloves to prove their loyalty, and because they think it will make them immune to the effects. But it’s just killing them slowly.”

“Huh. Well, that’s…absolutely horrifying.” Puck shook his head in disbelief. “Still, we have to get in there somehow, iron weapons or no. Can we glamour ourselves to look like them?”

“It won’t hold up against all the iron,” Ash muttered, deep in thought.

“I might have a better idea,” Grimalkin said. “There are several glass skylights on the roof of the factory. You could map the layout of the building from there, maybe even see where Virus is.”

That sounded like a good idea. But… “How do we get up there?” I asked, staring at the looming glass-and-metal wall of the factory. “Puck can fly, and I’m sure Ash can get up there, but Ironhorse and I are a little more earthbound.”

Grimalkin nodded sagely. “Normally, I would agree. But tonight, it seems the Fates are on our side. There is a window cleaner’s platform on the far side of the building.”

* * *

EVEN WITH Ironhorse’s assurance that the gremlins wouldn’t bother us, we approached with extreme caution. The memory of being kidnapped by the gremlins, their sharp claws digging into my skin, their freaky, maniacal laughter and buzzing voices, still burned hot in my mind. One had even lived in my iPod before it was broken, and Machina had used it to communicate with me even within the borders of Arcadia. Gremlins were sneaky, evil, little monsters, and I didn’t trust them one bit.

Fortunately, our luck seemed to hold as we made our way around the back of the factory. A small platform hovered over the ground, attached to a pulley system that climbed all the way up to the roof. The wall was dark, and the gremlins were absent, at least for now.

Grimalkin hopped lightly onto the wooden platform, followed by Ash and Puck, being careful not to touch the iron railings. Ash pulled me up after him, and then Ironhorse clambered aboard. The wooden planks creaked horribly and bent in the middle, but thankfully held firm. I prayed

the entire thing wouldn't snap like a matchstick when we were three stories in the air.

Puck and Ironhorse each grabbed a rope and began drawing the platform up the side of the building. The dark, mirrored walls reflected a strange party back at us: a cat, two elf-boys, a girl in a slightly tattered gown, and a monstrous black man with glowing red eyes. I contemplated how strange my life had become, but was interrupted by a soft hiss overhead.

A gremlin crouched on the pulleys near the top of the roof, slanted eyes glowing in the dark. Spindly and long limbed, with huge batlike ears, it flashed me its razor-blue grin and let out a buzzing cry.

Instantly, gremlins started appearing from everywhere, crawling out of windows, scuttling along the walls, swarming over the roof to peer at us. A few even clung to the pulley ropes or perched on the railings, staring at us with their eerie green gaze. Ash pulled me close, his sword bared to slash at any gremlin who ventured near, but the tiny Iron fey didn't make any move to attack. Their buzzing voices filled the air, like radio static, and their vivid grins surrounded us with a blue glow as we continued to inch up the wall, unhindered.

"What are they doing?" I whispered, pressing closer to Ash. He held me protectively with one arm, his sword between us and the gremlins. "Why are they just staring at us? What do they want? Ironhorse?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "I DO NOT KNOW, PRINCESS," he replied, sounding as mystified as I felt. "I HAVE NEVER SEEN THEM ACT IN THIS MANNER BEFORE."

"Well, tell them to go away. They're creeping me out."

A buzz went through the gremlins surrounding us, and the swarm began to clear. Crawling back along the walls, they disappeared through the windows, squeezed into the cracks or scrambled back over the roof. As suddenly as they'd appeared, the gremlins vanished, and the wall was dark and silent again.

"Okay." Puck cast wary looks all around us. "That was…weird. Did someone release gremlin repellant? Did they just get bored?"

Ash sheathed his sword and released me. "Maybe we scared them off."

"Maybe," I said, but Ironhorse was staring at me, his crimson eyes unfathomable.

Grimalkin reappeared, scratching his ear as if nothing had happened. “It does not matter now,” he said, as the platform scraped up against the roof. “They are gone, and the scepter is close.” He yawned and blinked up at us. “Well? Are you just going to stand there and hope it flies into your hands?”

We crowded off the platform onto the roof of the factory. The wind was stronger here, tugging at my hair and making my gown snap like a sail. I held on to Ash as we made our way across the roof. Far below and all around us, the city sprawled out like a glittering carpet of stars.

Several raised glass skylights sat in the middle of the roof, emitting a fluorescent green glow. Cautiously, I edged up to one and peered down.

“There,” Ash muttered, pointing to a mezzanine twenty or so feet above the floor, and maybe thirty feet below us. Through the glass, I could pick out a blur of poison-green amid the stark grays and whites, surrounded by several faeries in black armor. Virus walked to the edge of the overhang and gazed out over a crowd of assembled fey, ready to give a speech, I supposed. I saw Thornguards and wiremen and a few green-skinned men in business suits, along with several fey I didn’t recognize. The scepter pulsed yellow-green in Virus’s hands as she swept it over her head, and a muffled roar went through the crowd.

“Okay, so we found her,” Puck mused, pressing his nose against the glass. “And it looks like she hasn’t gathered her whole army quite yet, which is nice. So, how do we get to her?”

Ash made a quiet noise and drew back.

“You don’t,” he muttered. “I will.” He turned to face me. “For all she knows, I’m still under her control. If I can get close enough to grab the scepter before she figures out what happened—”

“Ash, no. That’s way too dangerous.”

He gave me a patient look. “Anything we try will be dangerous. I’m willing to take that risk.” His hand came up, fingers brushing the spot where Puck had stabbed him. “I’m still not completely recovered. I won’t be able to fight as well as I normally do. Hopefully, I can fool Virus long enough to get the scepter from her.”

“And then what?” I demanded. “Fight your way out? Against those masses? And Virus? What if she knows you don’t have the bug anymore? You can’t expect to—” I stopped, staring at him, as something clicked in my head. “This isn’t about getting the scepter, is it?” I murmured, and he

looked away. “This is about killing Virus. You’re hoping to get close enough to stab her or cut off her head or whatever, and you don’t care what happens next.”

“What she did to me was bad enough.” Ash’s silver eyes glittered as he turned back, cold as the moon overhead. “What she made me do, I will never forgive. If I am discovered, I will at least create a big enough distraction for you to slip in and grab the scepter.”

“You could die!”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“It does to me.” I stared at him in horror. He really meant it. “Ash, you can’t go down there alone. I don’t know where this fatalistic crap is coming from, but you can stop it right now. I’m not going to lose you again.”

“SHE IS RIGHT.”

We looked up. Ironhorse stood on the other side of the glass, watching us. His eyes glowed red in the darkness. “IT *IS* TOO DANGEROUS. FOR YOU.”

I frowned. “What are you talking—”

“PRINCESS.” Abruptly, he bowed. “IT HAS BEEN AN HONOR. WERE THINGS DIFFERENT, I WOULD GLADLY SERVE YOU UNTIL THE END OF TIME.” He looked to Ash and nodded, as it suddenly dawned on me what he was implying. “SHE THINKS THE WORLD OF YOU, PRINCE. PROTECT HER WITH YOUR LIFE.”

“Ironhorse, don’t you dare!”

He whirled and took off, oblivious to my cries for him to stop. My heart clenched as he approached the second skylight, and I watched helplessly as he gathered himself and jumped…

The glass exploded as he crashed into it, shattering into a million sparkling pieces. Gasping, I looked through the skylight to see the glittering shards rain down on the crowd below. Screaming and snarling, they looked up, covering their eyes and faces as the massive iron horse smashed into their midst with a *boom* that shook the building. Roaring, Ironhorse reared up, blasting flame from his nostrils, steel hooves flailing in deadly arcs.

The room erupted into chaos. Once they recovered from their shock, Thornguards and wiremen surged forward to attack, flinging themselves at Ironhorse, ripping and clawing.

“We have to get down there!” I cried, rushing toward the broken skylight only to have Ash catch my arm.

“Not that way,” he said, pulling me back to the unbroken window. “The distraction has already been launched. We cannot help him now. Our target is Virus and the scepter. You should stay here, Meghan. You have no magic and—”

I yanked my arm from his grip. “You did *not* just bring that excuse up again!” I snarled, and he blinked in surprise. I glared at him. “Remember what happened the last time you went off without me? Get this through your stubborn head, Ash. I’m not staying behind and that’s final.”

One corner of his mouth twitched, just a little. “As you wish, Princess” he said, and glanced at Puck, who was leering at us both. “Goodfellow, are you ready?”

Puck nodded and leaped onto the skylight. I scowled at them both and clambered onto the glass, ignoring Puck’s hand to help me up. “How do you expect us to get down there?” I demanded as I clawed myself upright. “Go right through the window?”

Puck snickered. “Glass is a funny thing, Princess. Why do you think ancient people put salt along windowsills to keep us out?” I looked down and saw Virus directly below us, shouting and waving the scepter above her head, her attention riveted on the battle and Ironhorse.

Ash leaped onto the skylight, drawing his sword as he did. “Look after Meghan,” he said, as glamour began shimmering around both him and Puck. “I’ll take care of Virus.”

“What—?” I started, but Puck suddenly swept me into his arms. I was so surprised I didn’t have time to protest.

“Hold on tight, Princess,” he murmured, as a shimmer went through the air around us, and we dropped straight through the glass like it wasn’t there.

We plummeted toward the overhang, a shriek escaping my throat, but it was swallowed up in the chaos between Ironhorse and the rest of the fey. Ash dropped toward Virus like an avenging angel, his coat flapping in the wind, sword bared and gleaming as he raised it over his head.

At the last moment, one of the Thornguards surrounding Virus glanced up, and his eyes got huge. Drawing his sword, he gave a shout of warning, and amazingly, Virus whirled and looked up. Ash’s blade slashed down in

a streak of blue and met the Scepter of the Seasons as Virus swept it up to block him.

There was a flash of blue and green light and a hideous screech that echoed through the room and caused every eye to turn to the pair on the overhang. Sparks flew between the ice blade and the scepter, bathing the combatants' faces in flickering lights. Virus looked rather shocked to be facing her former soldier; Ash's mouth was tight with concentration as he bore down on her with his sword.

Puck set me down—I didn't even remember landing—and leaped between the Thornguards as they rushed up with drawn swords. Grinning, he threw himself at the guards, daggers flashing in the hellish light coming from Ash's blade and the scepter.

Then Virus started to laugh.

I felt a surge of cold iron glamour, and she shoved Ash away, pushing him back in a flash of green. He recovered immediately, but before he could rush her again, Virus retreated, stepping off the mezzanine to float several feet in the air. Her poisonous green eyes found me and she smiled.

"Well." She sniffed and cast bemused glances at the chaos spread at her feet. Ironhorse, surrounded by Iron fey, still kicked and raged at them, though his struggles were growing weaker. More Thornguards came rushing up the steps, but these held crossbows with iron bolts, pointed right at us. Ash and Puck drew back so that they were standing between me and the guards, who had us surrounded in a bristly black ring.

"Meghan Chase. You are full of surprises, aren't you?" Virus smiled at me. "I've no idea how you managed to free the Winter prince from my bug, but it doesn't matter now. The armies of the false king are ready to march on Summer and Winter. Once they have taken the Nevernever and killed off the oldblood rulers, it will be our turn. We will overrun their armies and kill the false king before he has a chance to savor his victory. Then, the Nevernever will belong to m—"

She didn't have a chance to finish. Ash drew back and hurled a flurry of ice daggers at her face, taking her by surprise. She flinched, holding up the scepter; there was a flash of green light and a surge of power. The icicles shattered, bursting apart before they reached her. With angry shouts, the crossbow men released their quarrels even as Virus screamed at them to stop.

The deadly storm of iron bolts flew toward us. I could *feel* them sailing through the air, *Matrix* style, leaving distorted ripples in their wake. Without thinking, I turned and flung out my hand. I didn't think how crazy it was, that at such close range the bolts would rip right through me like I was paper. That we would all most certainly die, peppered by lethal darts that could kill even if they weren't made of iron. I wasn't thinking of anything as I spun and gestured sharply, feeling a surge of electricity beneath my skin.

A ripple went through the air. The bolts flew to either side of us, thunking into the walls and pinging off metal beams to clatter to the floor. I heard Iron fey shriek as they were hit, but not one of the half-dozen bolts touched us.

The Thornguards gaped. Ash and Puck stared at me as if I had grown another head. I shivered violently, trembling from the strange cold glamour that writhed under my skin and buzzed in my ears.

"Impossible." Virus spun slowly to face me, her face draining of color. She shook her head, as if trying to convince herself. "You cannot be the one. A weakling human girl? You're not even one of us. It's a mistake, it must be!"

I had no idea what she was talking about, but it didn't seem to matter. Virus started to giggle, sticking a green-tinted nail in her mouth, her laughter growing louder and more hysterical, until she stopped and glared at me with wide, crazy eyes. "No!" she screamed, making even the Thornguards flinch. "It isn't right! I was his second! His power should have been mine!"

Her mouth opened, gaping impossibly wide, and the Thornguards backed away. Heart pounding, I pressed close to Ash and Puck, feeling their grim determination, their resolve to go down fighting no matter what. The air started to vibrate, a terrible buzzing filling the air, and Virus threw her head back. With the droning of a million bees, a huge swarm of metal bugs spiraled up from Virus's mouth, swirling around her in a frantic glittering cloud.

Her smile was savage as she looked down at us, extending a hand from the center of the buzzing tornado. "Now, my dears," she said, barely audible over the droning of a thousand bugs, "we will end this little game once and for all. I should have done this when I first saw you, but I had no idea you were the one I was searching for all along."

Everything grew very still. The cold glamour still buzzed beneath my skin, and I could taste metal on the air. I looked at the swarm and saw thousands of individual bugs, but also a single creature sharing one mind, one goal, one purpose.

A hive mind, I thought impassively, not knowing why I felt so calm. *Control one, and you control them all.*

Vaguely, I was aware that Virus was speaking, her voice seeming to come from very far away.

"Go," she screamed, sweeping her arm toward us. "Crawl down their throats and nostrils, into their eyes and ears and every open pore. Burrow into their brains and make them tear out their own hearts!"

The Swarm flew toward us, a furious, buzzing cloud. Ash and Puck pressed close; I felt one of them shaking but couldn't tell who. A droning filled my ears as the Swarm approached, glowing bright with iron glamour, melded into a single massive entity.

One mind. One creature.

I threw up both my hands as the Swarm dove forward to attack, *Stop!*

The Swarm broke apart, swirling around us, filling the air with their deafening buzz. But they didn't attack. We stood in the middle of the screaming hurricane, metal bugs zipping around us frantically but moving no closer.

I felt the Swarm straining against my will, fighting to get past it. I saw Virus's face, first slack with disbelief, then white with fury. She made a violent gesture, and the Swarm buzzed angrily in response. I strengthened my hold, pouring magic into the invisible barrier, drawing glamour from the factory. My head pounded, and sweat ran into my eyes, but I couldn't break my concentration or we'd be torn apart.

Virus smiled nastily. "I have underestimated you, Meghan Chase," she said, rising higher into the air. "I did not think you would force me to use the scepter, but there you go. Do you know what this does, my dear?" she asked, holding it out before her. Ash looked up sharply. "It took me forever to puzzle it out, but I finally got it." She grinned, triumphant. "It enhances the power of the one who holds it. Isn't that interesting? So, for instance, I could make my darling bugs do this…"

The scepter glowed a sickly green, and in that light, the Swarm started to change. They swelled like ticks full of blood, becoming sharp and spiky, with long stingers and huge curved jaws. Now they were the size of my

fist, a horrible cross between a wasp and a scorpion, and their wings scraped against each other like a million knives. And their *minds* changed, to something more savage, more visceral and predatory. I nearly lost my hold on them, and the whirlwind tightened, pressing closer to us, before I regained control and pushed them back.

Buzzing furiously, they turned on whatever living thing they could reach, including the guards surrounding us. The Thornguards screamed, reeling back and clawing at themselves as the metal bugs swarmed over them, biting and stinging, burrowing into their armor.

Virus giggled madly overhead. “Kill them!” she cried, as several bugs chewed their way into their victims, who fell thrashing and screaming to the ground. My stomach heaved, but I couldn’t look away for fear of losing control of the Swarm. I didn’t know what Virus thought she was doing until a moment later, when the Thornguards lurched to their feet again, crazed gleams in their eyes.

Raising their swords, they staggered toward us, blood pouring from their wounds and the holes in their armor, their eyes empty of reason. Ash and Puck met them at the edge of the whirlwind, and the clash of weapons joined the metallic drone of the Swarm.

We were lost. I couldn’t keep this up forever. My head throbbed so much that I felt nauseous, and my arms were shaking violently. I could feel my strength draining with the amount of glamour I was using to keep the Swarm at bay.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a Thornguard, covered in bugs, stagger to the edge of the platform and pick up a crossbow. Raising it up, he loaded an iron bolt and swung it around at me. I couldn’t move. If I dodged, the Swarm would break free and kill us. Puck and Ash were busy fighting off the other guards and couldn’t help. I couldn’t even shout a warning. In slow motion, I watched him raise the crossbow, unhindered, and take aim.

Later, I remembered the clanging footsteps charging up the steps only because they seemed so out of place. I saw Puck whirl around, saw his dagger whip out and soar end over end toward the Thornguard, just as he pulled the trigger. The dagger thunked into the guard’s chest, hurling him off the mezzanine, but it was too late. The bolt was coming toward me, and I couldn’t do anything about it.

Something huge and black lunged across my vision a split second before the bolt hit home. Ironhorse, covered in bugs and shedding chunks of iron everywhere, stumbled, fighting desperately to stay on his feet. He staggered toward the edge of the overhang, shaking his head as bugs swarmed him viciously. A hoof slipped off the edge, and he lurched sideways.

"No!" I screamed.

With a last defiant bellow and blast of flame, Ironhorse toppled from the edge, vanishing from sight. I heard his body strike the cement with a resounding boom that echoed through the building, and my vision went white with rage.

I arched my back, clenching my fists, and glamour rushed through me, exploding out in a wave. *"GET BACK!"* I roared at the Swarm, at Virus, at every Iron faery in the room. *"Damn you all! Back off, NOW!"*

The Swarm flew in every direction, scattering to all four corners of the room. The Thornguards flinched and stumbled backward; some even fell off the edge of the railing. Even Virus jerked in midair, reeling back like she had been sucker punched, her hands falling limply at her sides.

I slumped to the floor, all the strength going out of me. As the Swarm began coalescing again, buzzing angrily as they swarmed back together, and the Thornguards regained their senses, Virus put a hand to her temple and looked down at me, a smug grin stretching her blue lips.

"Well, Meghan Chase. Congratulations, you've managed to give me a pounding headache. But it is not enough to—aaaahhhhhh!"

She jerked, throwing up her hands as Ash launched himself off the edge of the railing and leaped at her, sword raised high. Still screaming, she tried to bring up the scepter, too late. The ice blade sliced down, through her collarbone and out the other side, cutting her clean in two.

If I wasn't so dizzy, I might've puked. Virus's halves fell away, wires and oily goo spilling from her severed body as both she and Ash dropped out of sight.

The Thornguards spasmed, then collapsed like puppets with cut strings. As I sat there, dazed by what had just happened, Puck hauled me upright and dragged me under a beam. Then it started raining insects.

The clatter of metal bugs brought me back to my senses. "Ash," I muttered, struggling to free myself. Puck wrapped his arms around me and held me to his chest. "I have to go to him…see if he's all right."

“He’s fine, Princess,” Puck snapped, tightening his grip. “Relax. He knows enough to get out of the rain.”

I relented. Closing my eyes, I leaned into him, resting my head on his chest as the bugs clattered around us like glittering hail. He hugged me close, muttering something about Egyptian plagues, but I wasn’t listening. My head hurt, and I was still trying to process everything that had just happened. I was so tired, but at least it was over. And we had survived.

Or, most of us had.

“Ironhorse,” I whispered as the rain of bugs finally came to an end. I felt Puck tense. Freeing myself from his arms, I stumbled across the mezzanine, taking care to avoid the dead bugs and Thornguards, and groped my way down the stairs. I didn’t know what I’d find, but I was hopeful. Ironhorse couldn’t be dead. He was the strongest of us all. He might be terribly hurt, and we’d have to find someone to put him back together, but Ironhorse was near invincible. He had to have survived. He had to.

I’d almost convinced myself not to worry when Ash stepped out from beneath the overhang and stood at the foot of the stairs, gazing up at me. His sword was sheathed, and in one hand, the Scepter of the Seasons pulsed with a clean blue light.

For a long moment, we stared at each other, unwilling to break the silence, to voice what we both were thinking. I wondered if Ash would take the scepter and leave. Our contract was done. He had what he came for; there was no reason for him to stick around any longer.

“So.” I broke the silence first, trying to quell the tremor in my voice, the stupid tears that pressed behind my eyes once more. “Are you leaving now?”

“Soon.” His voice was calm but tired. “I’ll be returning to Winter, but I thought I would pay my respects to the fallen before I go.”

My stomach dropped. I looked behind him and saw, for the first time, the pile of mangled iron in the shadows of the mezzanine. With a gasp, I lurched down the rest of the stairs, pushed past Ash, and half ran, half stumbled to where Ironhorse lay surrounded by dead bugs and the smoking remains of Virus.

“Ironhorse?” For a split second, I thought I saw Grimalkin there, sitting at his head. But I blinked back tears and the image was gone. Ironhorse lay on his side, heaving with great raspy breaths, the fires in his

belly burning low. One of his legs was shattered, and huge chunks of his body had been ripped away. Pistons and gears were scattered around him like broken clockwork.

I knelt beside his head, putting a shaking hand on his neck. It was cold, and his once burning red eyes were dim, flickering erratically. At my touch, he stirred, but didn't raise his head or look at me. I had a horrid suspicion he couldn't see any of us.

"Princess?"

Hearing his voice, so small and breathy, almost made me burst into tears. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, feeling Puck and Ash press behind me, gazing over my shoulder.

"No." The red in his eyes dimmed to tiny pinpricks, and his voice dropped to a whisper. I had to strain to hear him. "It was…an honor…" He sighed one last time, as the tiny spots of light flickered once, twice. "…my queen." And he was gone.

I closed my eyes and let the tears come. For Ironhorse, who had never wavered, never once compromised his beliefs or convictions. Who had been an enemy, but chose to become an ally, a guardian and, ultimately, a friend. I knelt on the cold tile and sobbed, unembarrassed, as Puck and Ash looked on gravely, until the faint rays of dawn began seeping through the broken skylights.

"Meghan." Ash's quiet voice broke through my grieving. "We should go." His tone was gentle but unrelenting. "The Iron King's army is ready to march. We have to return the scepter. There's not much time left."

I sat up and wiped my eyes, cursing the damned faeries and their eternal war. It seemed there was never enough time. Time to dance, or talk, or laugh, or even mourn the passing of a friend. Slipping off my corsage, I laid it on Ironhorse's cold metal shoulder, wanting him to have something natural and beautiful in this lifeless place. *Goodbye, Ironhorse.* Ash held out a hand, and I let him pull me to my feet.

"Where to now?" I sniffled.

"The Reaping Fields," answered a familiar voice, and Grimalkin appeared, perched several feet away on a cardboard box. He gingerly batted a metal bug off the surface, where it pinged to the floor, before continuing. "All the major battles between the courts have been fought on those plains. If I were looking for the armies of Summer and Winter, that is where I would go."

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I did not say I was sure, human.” Grimalkin twitched his whiskers at me. “I only said that is where I would look. Also, I am not coming with you.”

Somehow, this didn’t surprise me. “Why not? Where are you going this time?”

“Back to Leanansidhe’s.” Grimalkin yawned and stretched, arching his tail over his back. “Now that we are done here, I will inform her that Virus is dead, and that the scepter is on its way back to the Winter Court. I am sure she will want to hear about your success.” The cat turned, waving his tail in farewell. “Until next time, human.”

“Grim, wait.”

He paused, looking back with unblinking golden eyes.

“What did Ironhorse promise you, that made you come along?”

He flicked his tail. “It is not for you to know, human,” he replied, his voice low and solemn. “Perhaps you will find out, someday. Oh, and if you do make it to Reaping Field, look for a friend of mine. He still owes me a favor. I believe you have met him before.” And with that cryptic message, he leaped off the box and wove gracefully through the scattered hordes of fey and metal bugs. Trotting behind a beam, he disappeared.

I looked at the boys. “How will we get to Reaping Field?”

Ash held up the scepter. It throbbed with icy blue light, sparkling like it was made of crystal, as I’d first seen it back in Tir Na Nog. “I’ll use the scepter to open a trod,” he murmured, turning away. “Stand back.”

The scepter flared, filling the room with cold, making my breath steam. The air around us shimmered, as though a veil had been dropped over everything. A hazy circle opened up in front of Ash; beyond it, I saw trees and earth and the foggy twilight of the wyldwood.

“Go,” Ash told us, his voice slightly strained.

“Come on, Princess. This is our stop.” Puck gestured at the portal, waiting for me to go through. I turned and cast one final look at Ironhorse’s body, lying cold on the cement, and blinked back tears.

Thank you, I told him silently, and stepped through the circle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Reaping Fields

The wyldwood was in chaos. Wind and hail whipped around me as I stumbled off the trod, screaming through the branches and pelting me with shards of ice. Green lightning streaked overhead, slashing through massive clouds that roiled and churned above us, shaking branches and stirring debris into violent whirlwinds. Gouts of snow intermingled with the rain, gathering in mounds and drifts and then scattered by the wind. A violet-skinned piskie went hurtling by, caught in a savage tailspin, until she vanished into the trees.

"Dammit." Puck appeared behind me, crimson hair flying in all directions. He had to shout to be heard. "They started the war without us. I had an invitation, too."

Ash stepped through the circle, and it closed behind him. "Reaping Field is close." He raised his head to the wind, closing his eyes, and his brow furrowed. "The fighting is well underway. I can smell the blood. Follow me."

We hurried through the forest, Ash in front leading the way, the scepter a bright blue glow against the dark of the wyldwood. Around us, the storm raged and howled, and thunder boomed overhead, shaking the ground. My shoes sank into the mud, and my gown snagged on a dozen thorns and branches that tore through the fabric and ripped what remained to shreds.

Finally, the trees fell away, leaving us staring over a vast, icy gulley flanked by rugged hills, their tops disappearing into the clouds. A frozen river snaked its way through the boulder-studded valley, coiling lazily around the ruins of an ancient castle in the center of the plains.

From here, the armies of Summer and Winter looked like swarming ants, a huge, chaotic blur of motion and color. Roars and screams filled the air, rising above the howl of the wind. Ranks of soldiers clashed against one another in a somewhat disciplined fashion, while other groups

bounded across the field, ricocheting from one fight to the next, joyfully hurling themselves into the fray. Giant shapes lumbered through the masses, swinging and crushing, and swarms of flying creatures attacked from the air. It was a colossal, violent, crazy free-for-all that would be suicide to go through.

I gulped and looked to Ash and Puck. “We’re going through that, aren’t we?”

Ash nodded. “Look for Oberon or Mab,” he said grimly, scanning the battlefield. “They’ll likely be on opposite sides of the river. Try not to engage anything, Goodfellow. We don’t want a fight—we just want to get the scepter to the queen.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Prince.” Puck grinned and drew his daggers, pointing to Ash with the tip. “You’re a traitor, Meghan’s the Summer princess, and I’m Robin Goodfellow. I’m sure the ranks of Unseelie will just let us waltz right through.”

And then, a shadow fell over us, and a blast of wind nearly knocked me down. Ash shoved me away as a huge, winged lizard landed where I’d stood in an explosion of snow and rock. The creature hissed and shrieked, beating tattered wings and churning the ground with two clawed forelegs. Its scales were a dusty brown, its yellow eyes vicious and stupid. A long, muscular tail whipped the air behind it, a wicked, gleaming barb on the end. Hissing, it stepped between me, Ash and Puck, separating us with its body, coiling its tail over its back like a massive scorpion.

A rider sat between the creature’s shoulder blades, his white armor pristine and shining, not a drop of blood on him.

“Rowan!” I gasped.

“Well, well.” The older prince sneered at me from the back of his lizard mount. “Here you are again. The wayward princess and our traitor prince. Don’t move, Ash,” he warned, shooting his brother a dark look. “One tiny move, and Thraxa will snap up your beloved half-breed faster than you can blink. You don’t want to lose *another* girl to wyvern poison, do you?”

Ash already had his sword out, but at Rowan’s threat he paled and shot me a haunted look. I saw the desperation in his eyes before he lowered his blade and stepped back.

“Good boy. This will be over soon, don’t worry.” Rowan raised his fist, and a dozen Thornguards emerged from the trees, weapons drawn, trapping

us between them and Rowan. “It shouldn’t be long now,” the older prince smiled. “Once the courts are done tearing each other to pieces, the Iron King’s armies will sweep in, and everything will be over.

“But first,” he continued, turning to glare at Ash, “I’ll need that scepter. Hand it over, little brother.”

Ash tensed, but before he could do anything, Puck stepped between us, an evil grin stretching his face. “Come and get it,” he challenged. Rowan looked over and sneered.

“Robin Goodfellow,” he smiled. “I’ve heard so much about you. You’re the reason Ariella is dead, aren’t you?” Puck frowned, but Rowan went on without pause. “A pity Ash won’t ever take his revenge, but believe me when I say this will be a pleasure. Thraxa,” he ordered, sweeping his arm contemptuously toward Puck. “Kill.”

The wyvern hissed and snaked its head down, baring needle sharp fangs. It was frighteningly quick, like a viper, and its jaws snapped shut over Puck’s head.

I gasped, but Puck exploded in a swirl of leaves, leaving the wyvern blinking and confused. As it drew back, huffing and scanning the ground for its victim, a huge black raven swooped out of the trees, aiming right for its face. With a screeching caw, the bird sank its talons into the side of the wyvern’s head and plunged its sharp beak into the slitted yellow eye.

The wyvern reared back with a scream, beating its wings and shaking its head, trying to dislodge the bird that clung to it. Rowan, nearly thrown from the saddle, cursed and yanked at the reins, trying to regain control, but the wyvern was panicked now, screeching and thrashing about in anguish. I ducked beneath the monster and ran to Ash, who caught me in an almost desperate hug, even as he kept his eyes on Rowan. I felt his heart racing beneath his coat.

The raven hung on, jabbing and clawing, until black ichor spattered the wyvern’s face and the eye was a popped, useless mess. With a caw of triumph, it broke away and swooped back to us, changing to Puck in an explosion of feathers. He was still laughing as he rose to his feet, drawing his weapons with a flourish.

“Kill them!” Rowan screamed, as his mount decided it had had enough, and leaped skyward. “Kill them all and get that scepter! Don’t let them ruin everything!”

“Stay back,” Ash told me as the Thornguards started forward, closing their deadly half circle. There were a lot of them, seeming to melt out of the trees and bramble, more than I first thought. My eyes fell on Ash, holding both the scepter and his sword in a double-weapon stance. Could I just take the scepter and run? I shot a quick glance down the slope, into the valley, and my heart went cold with fear. No way. There was no way I’d get through that churning mass alive.

Lightning flickered, bright and eerie, and between one flash and the next, a white creature appeared at the edge of the slope. At first, I thought it was a horse. Only it was smaller and more graceful than any I’d seen before, more deer than equine, with a lion’s tail and cloven hooves that barely touched the ground. Its horn spiraled up between its ears, beautiful and terrible at the same time, destroying any preconceived notions I had of the word *unicorn.* It regarded me with eyes as ancient as the forest, and I felt a shiver of recognition, like a memory from a dream, but then it was gone.

Grimalkin sent me. The voice whispered in my head, soft as a feather’s passing. *Hurry, Meghan Chase.* With a toss of its head, the unicorn turned and vanished down the slope. In that moment, I knew what I had to do.

That whole encounter seemed to have taken place in an instant. When I turned back to the boys, they were still waiting for the Thornguards, who approached slowly, as if they knew we weren’t going anywhere. “Ash,” I murmured, placing a hand on his arm. “Give me the scepter.”

He shot me a look over his shoulder. “What?”

“I’ll get it to Mab. Just hold them off until I can get across the field.” Ash stared at me, his expression torn. I closed my hand over the scepter, gritting my teeth as the cold burned like fire. “I can do this.”

“Hey, Prince,” Puck called over his shoulder, “uh, you can join in anytime, now. Whenever you’re ready.”

A shriek echoed over the valley, and a dark shape wheeled toward us on leathery wings. Rowan was coming back.

“Ash!” The Thornguards were almost upon us, and Ash still held the scepter tightly. Desperately, I met his eyes, saw the indecision there, the doubt, and the fear that he was sending me to my death. “Ash,” I whispered, and put my other hand over his, “you have to trust me.”

He shivered, nodded once, and released his grip. Clutching the scepter, I backed away, holding his worried gaze as the Thornguards got closer and

the wail of the wyvern echoed over the trees. “Be careful,” he said, a storm of emotion in those two simple words. I nodded breathlessly.

“I won’t fail,” I promised.

The Thornguards charged with a roar. Ash spun toward them, blade flashing, as Puck gave a whooping battle cry and plunged into their midst. Feeling the scepter burn in my hands, I turned and fled down the slope.

The unicorn waited at the bottom of the hill, almost invisible in the mist, its horn more real than the rest of it. My heart pounded as I approached. Even though the unicorn stood perfectly still, watching me, it was akin to walking up to a tiger that was tame and friendly, but still a tiger. It could either kneel and lay its head in my lap, or explode into violence and skewer me with that glimmering horn. Thankfully it did neither, standing motionless as a statue as I walked up close enough to see my reflection in its dark eyes. *What do I say? Do I have to ask permission to get on its back?*

A piercing wail rent the air above us, and the shadow of the wyvern passed overhead. The unicorn jumped, flattening its ears, trembling with the effort not to bolt. *Screw it, I don’t have time!* As the wyvern’s howl rang out again, I heaved myself awkwardly onto the unicorn’s back and grabbed its mane.

As soon as I was settled, the unicorn made a fantastic leap over the rocks and landed at the edge of the icy field, making my stomach lodge in my throat. For a moment, it hesitated, looking this way and that, trying to find an easier way in. A red-eyed hound sprang at us with a snarl, tongue lolling. The unicorn leaped nimbly aside, lashing out with its hooves. I heard a crack and a yelp, and the hound fled into the mist on three legs.

“There’s no time to go around!” I yelled, hoping the unicorn could understand me. “Mab is on the far side of the river! We have to go straight through!”

A bellow sounded behind us. I glanced back to see the wyvern dive from the slope and glide toward the ground, straight for us. I saw Rowan on the wyvern’s back, sword drawn, his furious gaze fixed on me, and my stomach clenched in terror. “Go!” I shrieked, and with a desperate whinny, we plunged into the heart of the battle.

The unicorn bounded through the chaos, dodging weapons, leaping over obstacles, moving with terrifying speed. My hand gripped the mane so hard that my arms shook; the other hand burned with the scepter.

Around us, Summer and Winter fey tore and slashed at each other, screaming in fury, pain and pure, joyful bloodlust. I caught flashes of the battle as we sped through. A pair of trolls pounded stone clubs into a swarm of goblins, their shoulders and backs bristling with spears. A trio of redcaps dragged a wailing sylph from the air, ignoring the razor edge of her dragonfly wings, and buried her under their stabbing knives. Seelie knights in green and gold armor clashed swords with Unseelie warriors, their movements so graceful it looked like they were dancing, but their unearthly beauty was twisted with hate.

The roar of the wyvern sounded directly above us, and the unicorn leaped aside so quickly I nearly lost my seat. I saw the wyvern's hooked, grasping talons slam into a dwarf, and the bearded man screamed as he was torn away and lifted into the air, struggling weakly. The wyvern soared upward, and I watched in horror as it dropped the still struggling dwarf to the rocks below. Wheeling in a lazy circle, it came for us again.

My mount started weaving, a frantic, zigzag pattern that jostled me from side to side and made me sick with fear. I pressed my knees into the unicorn's sides so hard that I felt its ribs through my gown. The wyvern wavered in the air, confused, then dove with another chilling wail. My nimble steed dodged once more, but this time the wyvern passed so close I could've slapped its claws with the back of my hand.

We were in the middle of the field, still nowhere near the river, when the unicorn went down.

The fighting was thicker in the center of the battleground, where soldiers from both sides clashed together over the dead and the dying. The unicorn darted between the crowds, seeming to know exactly when a hole would open up, slipping through without slowing down. But Rowan was still on our tail. As the unicorn dodged the wyvern's pass for the third time, a huge, rocklike monster reared up from beneath the snow, swiping at us with a massive club. It clipped the unicorn's front legs, and the graceful animal collapsed with a shrill whinny. I went flying off its back and hit a snowbank with a landing that drove the air from my lungs.

Dazed, I lay there as the world spun like a carousel, flickering in and out of view. Blurred, shadowy figures raged around me, screaming, but the sounds were muffled and distorted, coming from a great distance away.

Then the white shape of the unicorn reared up, pawing the air, slashing with its horn, before it was pulled under the black mass. I pushed myself

to my knees, calling out to it, but my arms shook, and I collapsed, sobbing in frustration. Once more, the unicorn reared up, its white coat streaked with crimson, several dark things clinging to its back. I cried out, crawling forward desperately, but with a shrill cry, the unicorn disappeared into the churning mass once more. This time, it didn't resurface.

As I gasped for breath, fighting tears, something wet and slimy dripped onto my arm. I looked up into the warty face of a goblin, its crooked teeth slick with drool as it grinned at me, flicking a pale tongue over its lips.

"Tasty girl dead yet?" it asked, poking my arm with the butt of its spear.

I lurched upright. Nausea surged through me and the ground twirled. I concentrated on not passing out. The goblin scuttled back with a hiss, then edged forward again. I frantically gazed around for a weapon, and saw the scepter, lying in the snow a few feet away.

The goblin grinned, raising its spear, then vanished under several tons of wyvern as the monstrous lizard landed on it with a boom that shook the ground, sending snow flying. Roaring, it reared back to strike, and I lunged for the scepter.

My hand closed over the rod, and a jolt of electricity shot up my arm. I felt the wyvern's hot breath on my neck and rolled back, bringing up the scepter. In that split second, I saw the gaping, tooth-filled maw of the wyvern fill my whole vision, and the scepter in my hand glowing, not blue or gold or green, but a pure, blinding white.

Lightning shot from the rod, slamming into the wyvern's open mouth. The blast flung the lizard's head back, filling the air with the stench of charred flesh. At the same time, I felt something inside me break, like a hammer striking glass, shattering into a million pieces. Sound, color and emotion flooded my mind, a bottled-up wave of glamour pouring outward, and I screamed.

A pulse ripped through the air, flying outward. It knocked the nearest fighters off their feet and continued, spreading across the field. Fighting a wave of dizziness, I staggered to my feet, swaying like a drunk sailor in a torn and filthy gown. I couldn't see Mab or Oberon through the indistinct shadows around me, but I did see hundreds of glowing eyes, shining blades and bared teeth, ready to tear me apart. I certainly had everyone's attention now.

The scepter pulsed in my hand. Gripping the handle, I raised it over my head. A flickering light spilled over the crowd, making them mutter and draw back.

"Where is Queen Mab?" I called, my voice reedy and faint, barely rising above the howl of the wind. No one answered, so I tried again. "My name is Meghan Chase, daughter of Lord Oberon. I am here to return the Scepter of the Seasons." I hoped someone told Mab quickly; I didn't know how much longer I could stay conscious, much less speak in coherent sentences in front of the queen.

Slowly, the crowd parted, and the air around us dropped several degrees, making my breath steam before my face. Mab came through the crowd on a huge white warhorse, her gown trailing behind her, her hair unbound and flowing down her back. The horse's hooves didn't quite touch the ground, and great gouts of steam billowed from its nostrils, wreathing the Winter Queen in a ghostly halo of fog. Her lips and nails were blue, her eyes as black as a starless night as she peered down at me.

"Meghan Chase." The queen's voice was a hiss, her perfect features terrifyingly blank. Her gaze flicked to the rod in my hand, and she smiled, cold and dangerous. "I see you have my scepter. So, is the Summer Court finally admitting their mistake?"

"No," came a strong voice before I could answer. "The Summer Court had nothing to do with stealing the scepter. You are the one who jumped to conclusions, Lady Mab."

And Oberon was there, sweeping through the crowd on a golden-bay stallion, flanked by a squad of elven knights. His faery mail glittered emerald and gold, bright links woven around protrusions of bark and bone, and an antlered helm rose above his head.

I felt a surge of relief at seeing him, but it shriveled when the Erlking looked at me, his green eyes cold and remote. "I told you before, Queen Mab," he said, speaking to Mab but still glaring at me, "I knew nothing of this, nor did I send my people to steal the scepter from you. You have started a war with us over a false pretense."

"So you say." Mab gave me a predatory smile, making me feel like a trapped rabbit. "But, it seems the Summer Court is still at fault, Erlking. You might have known nothing of the scepter, but your daughter admits her guilt by trying to return what is mine, hoping perhaps, that I will be merciful. Is that not correct, Meghan Chase?"

I noticed crowds of both Winter and Summer fey edging back from the rulers, and wished I could do the same. “No,” I blurted out, feeling the glare of both rulers burning holes through my skull. “I mean…no, I didn’t steal it.”

“Lies!” Mab leaped from her warhorse and stalking toward me. The mad gleam was back, and my stomach contracted in fear. “You are a filthy human, and all you speak is lies. You turned Ash against me. You made him fight his own brother. You fled Tir Na Nog and sought sanctuary with the exile Leanansidhe. Is this not true, Meghan Chase?”

“Yes, but—”

“You were in the throne room when my son was murdered. Why did they let you live? How did you survive, if it was not the Summer Court behind it all?”

“I told you—”

“If you did not steal the Scepter of the Seasons, who did?”

“The Iron fey!” I shouted, as my temper finally snapped. Not the smartest move, but I was hurt, dizzy, exhausted, and could still see the body of Ironhorse, sprawled lifelessly on the cement, the unicorn torn apart before my eyes. After everything we’d done, everything we’d gone through, to have some faery bitch accuse me of lying was the last straw. “I’m not lying, dammit!” I screamed at her. “Stop talking and just listen to me! The Iron fey stole the scepter and killed Sage! I was right there when it happened! There’s an army of them out there, and they’re getting ready to attack! That’s why they stole the scepter! They wanted you to kill each other before they came in and wiped out everything!”

Mab’s eyes went glassy and terrifying, and she raised her hand. I figured I was dead. You don’t shout at a faery queen and expect to walk away scot-free. But Oberon finally stepped forward, interrupting Mab before she could turn me into a Popsicle. “Hold, Lady Mab,” he said in a low voice. The Winter Queen turned her mad, killing glare on him, but he faced her calmly. “Just a moment, please. She is my daughter, after all.” He gave me a measuring look. “Meghan Chase, please return the scepter to Lady Mab, and let us be done with this.”

Gladly. I approached Mab and held out the scepter in both hands, anxious to be rid of the stupid thing. For all its power, it seemed such a small, trivial item, to cause so much hate and confusion and death. For a moment, the Winter Queen stared at me, her features cold and blank,

letting me sweat. Finally, and with great dignity, she reached out and took the scepter, and a great sigh of relief spread across the battlefield. It was done. The Scepter of the Seasons was back where it belonged, and the war was over.

"Now, Meghan Chase," Oberon said as the ripple died down, "why don't you tell us everything that happened?"

So I did, summarizing as best I could. I told them about Tertius stealing the scepter and killing Sage. I told them about the Thornguards, and how they wanted to become Iron fey themselves. I described Grimalkin leading us through the Briars, and how we met Leanansidhe, who agreed to help us. And finally, I told them about Virus, her plans to invade the Nevernever, and how we were able to track her down and get the scepter back.

I left out the parts with Ironhorse. Despite his help and noble sacrifice, they would only see him as the enemy, and I didn't want to be accused of guilt by association. When I was done, an incredulous silence hung in the air, and for a moment only the wind could be heard, howling over the plains.

"Impossible." Mab's voice was chilly, but it had lost the crazy edge, at least. My handing over the scepter seemed to placate her for now. "How did they get into the palace, and out again, without anyone seeing them?"

"Ask Rowan," I shot back, and a mutter went through the ranks of surrounding fey. "He's working with them."

Mab went absolutely still. Goose bumps rose along my arms as ice began creeping over the ground, snapping and crinkling, spreading out from the feet of the Winter Queen. When she spoke, her voice was soft, almost a whisper, but it scared me more than when she was crazy and shouting. "What did you say, half-breed?"

I glanced at Oberon, but he looked disbelieving, as well. I could feel his patience and support wearing thin; if I was going to accuse a son of Mab's of treason, I'd better be able to prove it. Else he wouldn't be able to protect me much longer.

"Rowan is working with the Iron fey," I repeated, as the ice spread around me, sparkling in the snow. "Him and the Thornguards. They…they want to become like them, immune to iron. They think—"

"Enough!" Mab's shriek made everyone but Oberon flinch. "Where is your proof, half-breed? Do not expect me to accept these blasphemous

claims without proof—you are a human and can lie so easily! You say my son has betrayed his court and kin, to side with these iron abominations that none have seen? Very well! Show me proof!" She pointed a finger at me, eyes narrowed in triumph. "If you have none, you are guilty of slandering the royal family, and I will punish you as I see fit!"

"I don't—" But the sounds of a struggle interrupted us. The crowds shifted, looking around, then stepped out of the way as a trio of faeries came through. Ash and Puck, bleeding, grim faced and dirty, dragging the spiky frame of a Thornguard between them. Staggering into the circle, they threw the faery at Mab's feet.

Panting, Puck straightened, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "There's your proof."

Oberon raised an eyebrow. "Goodfellow," he said, and that one word sent shivers down my spine and made Puck wince. "What is the meaning of this?"

Mab smiled. "Ash," she purred, but it wasn't a friendly greeting. "What a surprise to find you here, in the company of the Summer girl and Robin Goodfellow. Would you care to add anything more to your list of crimes?"

"My queen." Ash stood before Mab, breathing heavily, his expression bleak and resigned. "The princess speaks the truth. Rowan is a traitor to us. He sent his elite guard to bolster the armies of the Iron fey, he allowed them access into the palace, and he is responsible for the death of Prince Sage. Were it not for Robin Goodfellow and the Summer princess, the scepter would be lost, and the armies of the Iron King would overwhelm us." Mab narrowed her eyes, and Ash stepped back, nodding to the moaning Thornguard. "If you doubt my word, my queen, just ask him for the truth. I'm sure he would be happy to tell you everything."

"Screw it," Puck snapped, stalking past me. "Or you could just do this."

He pounced on the guard, driving his knee into the faery's armored chest. The Thornguard's arms came up to protect himself, and Puck grabbed one of his gauntlets, ripping the glove away and holding up his wrist.

The sharp tang of metal filled the air, and the circle of curious onlookers leaped back with cries of horror. The Thornguard's entire hand

was blackened and shriveled, the skin flaking off like ash. And on his long, gnarled finger, the iron ring gleamed brightly against the withered flesh.

"There!" Puck snapped, throwing the arm down and stepping away. "That proof enough for you? Every one of these bastards has one of those rings on, and it's not a fashion statement. If you want more proof, check the brambles at the top of the hill. We left this one alive to explain his little coup ambitions to his queen."

Mab turned her cold, cold gaze on the Thornguard, who cringed and started babbling.

"My queen, I can explain. Rowan ordered us to. I was acting on his command. He said it was the only way to save us. Please, I never wanted to…please, no!"

Mab gestured. There was a flash of blue light, and ice covered the guard, encasing him in frozen crystal. He drew a breath for one last scream, but the ice closed over his face and smothered it. I shivered and looked away.

"He will tell me everything later." Mab smiled coldly, speaking more to herself than to us. "Oh, yes. He will be begging to tell me." She looked up, her eyes as terrible as her voice. "Where is Rowan?"

As the crowds began muttering and looking around, I glanced over at the dead wyvern lying several yards away, smoke still curling from its open mouth. I shivered and turned away, already knowing the answer. Rowan was gone. They wouldn't find him in the Nevernever; he would flee to the Iron fey, continuing his quest to become like them.

After a long moment, it became clear that Rowan was no longer on the field. "Lady Mab," Oberon said, drawing himself up. "In light of this newest revelation, I propose a temporary truce. If the Iron King does plan to attack us, I'd prefer to meet him with my forces strong and ready. We will speak on this later, but for now I will be taking my people back to Arcadia. Meghan, Goodfellow." He nodded to us stiffly. "Come."

I looked at Ash, and he gave me a faint smile. I saw the relief on his face. But Mab wasn't about to let me go just yet. "Not so fast, my dear Oberon," she purred, and the smug satisfaction in her voice made my skin crawl. "I believe you are for getting something. The laws of our people apply to your daughter, as well. She must answer for turning my son against me." Mab pointed the scepter at me as angry murmurs went

through the crowd. “She must be punished for tricking him into helping her escape Tir Na Nog.”

“That wasn’t Meghan’s decision.” Ash’s deep voice cut through the muttering. I looked at him sharply and shook my head, but he ignored me. “It was mine. I made the choice. She had nothing to do with it.”

Mab turned to him, and her gaze softened. Smiling, she crooked a finger, and he approached at once, never wavering, though his hands were clenched at his sides. “Ash,” Mab crooned as he drew near. “My poor boy. Rowan told me what happened between the two of you, but I know you had your reasons. Why would you betray me?”

“I love her.”

Softly, and without hesitation, as if he’d already made up his mind. My heart turned over and I gasped, but it was lost in the ripple of horror and disbelief that went through the crowd. Whispers and muttering filled the air; some faeries snarled and hissed, baring their teeth, as if they wanted to mob Ash, but kept their distance from the queen.

Mab didn’t look surprised, though the smile curling her lips was as cold and cruel as a blade. “You love her. The half-breed daughter of the Summer lord.”

“Yes.”

I ached for him, my stomach twisting painfully. He looked so desolate standing there alone, facing a mad queen and several thousand angry fey. His voice was flat and resigned, as if he’d been pushed into a corner and had given up, not caring what happened next. I started to go to him, but Puck grabbed my arm, his green eyes solemn as he shook his head.

“Ash.” Mab placed a palm on his cheek. “You’re confused. I can see it in your eyes. You didn’t want this, did you? Not after Ariella.” Ash didn’t reply, and Mab drew back, regarding him intently. “You know what comes next, don’t you?”

Ash nodded once. “I swear an oath,” he whispered, “never to see her again, never to speak to her again, to sever all relationships and return to the Winter Court.”

“Yes,” Mab whispered back, and a sick despair tore at my heart. If Ash spoke those words, it would be over. A faery *couldn’t* break a promise, even if he wanted to. “Swear the oath,” Mab continued, “and all is forgiven. You can come back to Tir Na Nog. Return to the palace, and take your place as heir to the throne. Sage is gone, and Rowan is dead to me.”

Mab placed a kiss on Ash's cheek and stepped back. "You are the last prince of Winter. It is time to come home."

"I…" For the first time, Ash hesitated. His gaze met mine, bright and anguished, begging forgiveness. I choked on a sob and turned away, my throat aching with misery, not wanting to hear the words that would take him from me forever.

"I can't."

Silence fell over the field. Puck stiffened; I could feel his shock. Biting my lip, I turned back, hardly daring to believe. Ash faced Mab calmly, the queen staring at him with a terrible, blank expression on her face. "Forgive me," Ash murmured, and I heard the faintest of tremors beneath his voice. "But I can't…I won't…give her up. Not now, when I've just found her."

I couldn't take it anymore. Breaking away from Puck, I started toward Ash. I couldn't let him do this alone. But Oberon stepped in front of me, holding out his arm, as unmovable as a mountain. "Do not interfere, daughter," Oberon said in a voice meant only for me. "This is between the Winter prince and his queen. Let the song play to its conclusion."

Distraught, I looked back to Ash. Mab had gone very still, a beautiful, deadly statue, the ground beneath her coated with ice. Only her lips moved as she stared at her son, the air around them growing colder by the second. "You know what will happen, if you refuse."

If Ash was afraid, he didn't show it. "I know," he said in a weary voice.

"Their world will eat at you," Mab said. "Strip you away bit by bit. Cut off from the Nevernever, you will not survive. Whether it takes one mortal year or a thousand, you will gradually fade away, until you simply cease to exist." Mab stepped closer, pointing at me with the scepter. "She will die, Ash. She is only human. She will grow old, wither and die, and her soul will flee to a place you cannot follow. And then, you will be left to wander the mortal world alone, until you yourself are only a memory. And after that—" the queen opened her empty fist "—nothing. Forever."

Ash didn't react, but I felt the queen's words punch me in the stomach. Bile rose in my throat. How could I be so blind and stupid? Grimalkin had told me once that faeries banished from the Nevernever would die, that they would fade away until nothing was left. Tiaothin had told me that in the Winter palace, when I was trying to ignore her. I'd known all along, but refused to believe. Or perhaps I just hadn't wanted to remember.

“This is your final chance, Prince.” Mab stepped back, her voice stiff and icy, like she was talking to a stranger. “Give me your solemn vow, or be damned to the mortal world forever. Make your choice.”

Ash looked at me. I saw pain in his eyes, and a little regret, but they shone with such emotion I felt breathless. “I already have.”

“So be it.” If Mab’s voice was cold before, it was in the sub-zero range now. She waved the scepter and, with a sharp crack, a rip appeared in the air. Like ink spreading over paper, it widened into a jagged archway. Beyond the arch, a flickering streetlamp glimmered, and rain pounded the road, hissing. The smell of tar and wet asphalt drifted through the opening. “From this day forth,” Mab boomed, her voice carrying over the field, “Prince Ash is considered a traitor and an exile. All trods will be closed to him, all safe holds are barred, and if he is seen anywhere within the Nevernever, he is to be hunted down and killed immediately.” She looked at Ash, fury and contempt curling her lips. “You are not my son. Get out of my sight.”

Ash stepped back. Without a word, he turned and walked toward the archway, shoulders back and head high. At the edge of the trod, he hesitated, and I saw a shadow of fear cross his face. But then his expression hardened, and he swept through the door without looking back.

“Ash, wait!”

Darting around Oberon, I rushed for the trod. Faeries hissed and snarled, and Puck yelled for me to stop, but I ignored them all. As I approached Mab, her lips curled in a cruel smile and she stepped back, giving me a clear shot at the open trod.

“Meghan Chase!”

Oberon’s voice cracked like a whip, and a roar of thunder shook the ground. I stumbled to a halt a few feet from the doorway, so close that I could see the road and darkened street, the blurry outline of houses through the rain.

The Erlking’s voice was ominously quiet, and his eyes glowed amber through the gently falling snow. “The laws of our people are absolute,” Oberon warned. “Summer and Winter share many things, but love is not one of them. If you make this choice, daughter, the trods will never open for you again.”

My stomach dropped. There it was. Oberon would banish me from the Nevernever, as well. For a split second, I almost laughed in his face. This

wasn’t my home. I hadn’t asked to be half-fey. I’d never wanted to be caught up in their problems, or their world. Let him exile me; what did I care?

Don’t kid yourself, I thought with a sudden sick feeling in my gut. *You love this world. You risked everything to save it. Are you really going to walk away and forget it ever existed?*

“Meghan.” Puck stepped forward, pleading. “Don’t do this. I can’t follow you this time. Stay here. With me.”

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I’m sorry, Puck. I do love you, but I have to do this.” His face clouded with pain, and he turned away. Guilt stabbed at me, but in the end, the choice had always been clear.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again to Puck, to Oberon, to everyone, and turned back to the doorway. *I don’t belong here. Not really. Time to wake up and go home for real*.

“Are you sure, Meghan Chase?” Oberon’s voce was cold, remorseless. “Walk out of Faery with him now, and you’re never coming back.”

Somehow, the ultimatum made it that much easier.

“Then I’m never coming back,” I said softly, and went through the arch, leaving Faery behind me forever.

EPILOGUE

Second Homecoming

As I stumbled through the trod and onto the sidewalk, the rain hit me like a hammer, cold, wet and comfortingly unpleasant. Like normal rain. Lightning flickered overhead; regular, white lightning that didn't respond to the whims of a faery king's mood. My gown clung to my body; the drenching would be the finishing touch to ruining it completely, but I didn't care. My time in Faery was over. No more faery glamour, faery food or faery tricks. I was done.

With one exception, of course.

"Ash!" I called, squinting through the rain and darkness, through the glow of the streetlamps that made it impossible to see more than a few feet. "Ash, I'm here! Where are you?"

The empty road mocked me. Didn't he think I'd come after him? Was he already gone, fading into the rain without a backward glance, believing himself alone in the world? Tears muffled my voice. "Ash!" I yelled, taking a few steps down the sidewalk. "Ash!"

"You'll wake everyone up if you keep shouting like that."

I whirled around. He stood where the portal had been, hands in his pockets, the rain drumming his shoulders and making his hair run into his eyes. Lamplight fell around him, shining off his slick coat, surrounding him with a faint nimbus of light. But to me, he'd never looked so real.

"You came after me," he murmured, sounding awed, incredulous, and relieved at the same time. I walked up to him, smiling through my tears.

"You didn't think I'd let you go off alone, did you?"

"I was hoping." Ash stepped forward and hugged me, pulling me close with desperate relief. I slid my arms beneath his coat and held him tight, closing my eyes. The rain pounded us, and a lone car passed us on the road, spraying us with gutter water, but I felt no urge to move. As long as Ash held me, I could stay here forever.

He finally pulled back but didn’t release me from the circle of his arms. “So,” he murmured, his silver eyes boring into mine. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shivering as he brushed a strand of wet hair from my cheek. “I think…I should go home soon. Mom and Luke are probably going nuts. What about you?”

He shrugged, a casual lift of one shoulder. “You tell me. When I left the Nevernever, I didn’t have any plans other than being with you. If you want me around, just say the word.”

My eyes watered. I thought of Rowan, of Ironhorse, and the armies of the false king, still on the move. I thought of Leanansidhe and Charles, trapped in the Between. I would have to get him out someday, and confront Leanansidhe about stealing my dad so long ago. But for now, the only thing I wanted was standing right here, looking at me with an expression so open and unguarded that I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. “Don’t leave,” I whispered, tightening my hold. “Never leave me again. Stay with me. Forever.”

The Winter prince smiled, a small, easy smile, and lowered his lips to mine. “I promise.”

* * * * *

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One would think the second book in a series would be easy to write, now that you've finished the first one and gotten all the hard stuff out of the way. Ha ha ha! No. The second book is just as difficult, if not more so, as the first, and so the list of people I have to thank has not diminished in the slightest. My family, of course, for being so supportive and always believing I could do the impossible. My newfound friends online: Khy and Sharon and Kristi and Liyana, and all the wonderful YA book bloggers of the blogosphere, whose excitement and love of this genre makes me grateful and humbled at the same time. I cannot begin to express my thanks for all they have done. My agent, Laurie McLean, who always has time to answer my questions even though I spell her name wrong sometimes. Natashya Wilson and Adam Wilson, the perfect tag team of Super Editors, and all the wonderful, hardworking folks at Harlequin Teen. I cannot thank you all enough. And again, I must express my deepest, heartfelt gratitude to my husband, Nick, the greatest listener of all time. I still couldn't have done it without him.

THE IRON QUEEN

Julie Kagawa

“I can’t go home,” I whispered, feeling Ash’s gaze on me. “Not now. I can’t bring this madness home to my family.” I stared at the house for a moment more, then shut my eyes. “The false king won’t stop here. He’ll keep sending things after me, and my family will get caught in the middle. I can’t let that happen. I…I have to leave. Now.”

I opened my eyes and stared at the place where the Iron fey had fallen, at the slivers of metal glinting in the weeds. The thought of such monsters stealing into my room, turning their murderous eyes on Ethan or my mom, made me cold with rage. *All right*, I thought, clenching my fists in Ash’s shirt, *the false king wants a war? I’ll give him one.*

Buzz about The Iron Fey novels

"A full five-stars to Julie Kagawa's *The Iron Daughter.* If you love action, romance and watching how characters mature through heart-wrenching trials, you will love this story as much as I do."
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To Erica and Gail, Ash’s biggest fans. And to Nick, always my inspiration.

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Acknowledgments

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE
THE LONG ROAD HOME

Eleven years ago, on my sixth birthday, my father disappeared.

One year ago, on the very same day, my brother was taken from me, as well. But that time, I went into Faery to take him back.

It's strange how a journey can change you, what you can learn from it. I learned that the man I thought was my father wasn't my father at all. That my biological dad wasn't even human. That I was the half-breed daughter of a legendary faery king, and his blood flowed in my veins. I learned that I had power, a power that scares me, even now. A power that even the fey dread, something that can destroy them—and I'm not sure I can control it.

I learned that love can transcend race and time, and that it can be beautiful and perfect and worth fighting for but also fragile and heartbreaking, and sometimes sacrifice is necessary. That sometimes it's you against the world, and there are no easy answers. That you have to know when to hold on…and when to let go. And even if that love comes back, you could discover something in someone else who has been there all along.

I thought it was over. I thought my time with the fey, the impossible choices I had to make, the sacrifices for those I loved, was behind me. But a storm was approaching, one that would test those choices like never before. And this time, there would be no turning back.

* * *

My name is Meghan Chase.

In less than twenty-four hours, I'll be seventeen.

Déjà vu, right? Shocking how quickly time can pass you by, like you're standing still. I can't believe it's been a year since that day. The day I went into Faery. The day that changed my life forever.

Technically, I won't actually be turning seventeen. I've been in the Nevernever too long. When you're in Faery, you don't age, or you age so

slowly it's not worth mentioning. So, while a year has passed in the real world, I'm probably only a few days older than when I went in.

In real life, I've changed so much I don't even recognize myself.

Beneath me, the tatter-colt's hooves clopped against the pavement, a quiet rhythm that matched my own heartbeat. On this lonely stretch of Louisiana highway, surrounded by tupelo trees and moss-covered cypress, few cars passed us, and the ones that did flew by without slowing down, tossing leaves in their wake. They couldn't see the shaggy black horse with eyes like hot coals, walking along the road without reins or bit or saddle. They couldn't see the figures on its back, the pale-haired girl and the dark, beautiful prince behind her, his arms around her waist. Mortals were blind to the world of Faery, a world I was a part of now, whether I'd asked for it or not.

"What are you afraid of?" a deep voice murmured in my ear, sending a shiver up my spine. Even in the humid swamps of Louisiana, the Winter prince radiated cold, and his breath was wonderfully cool against my skin.

I peered at him over my shoulder. "What do you mean?"

Ash, prince of the Unseelie Court, met my gaze, silver eyes gleaming in the twilight. Officially, he was no longer a prince. Queen Mab had exiled him from the Nevernever after he refused to renounce his love for the half-human daughter of Oberon, the Summer King. My father. Summer and Winter were supposed to be enemies. We were not supposed to cooperate, we were not supposed to go on quests together and, most important, we were not supposed to fall in love.

But we had, and now Ash was here, with me. We were exiles, and the trods—the paths into Faery—were closed to us forever, but I didn't care. I wasn't planning to ever go back.

"You're nervous." Ash's hand stroked the back of my head, brushing the hair from my neck, making me shiver. "I can feel it. You have this anxious, flickering aura all around you, and it's driving me a little nuts, being this close. What's wrong?"

I should've known. There was no hiding what I felt from Ash, or any faery for that matter. Their magic, their glamour, came from human dreams and emotions. So Ash could sense what I was feeling without even trying. "Sorry," I told him. "I guess I am a little nervous."

"Why?"

“Why? I’ve been gone almost a year. Mom will hit the roof when she sees me.” My stomach squirmed as I imagined the reunion: the tears, the angry relief, the inevitable questions. “They didn’t hear anything from me while I was in Faery.” I sighed, gazing up the road to where the stretch of pavement melted into the darkness. “What am I going to tell them? How will I even begin to explain?”

The tatter-colt snorted and pinned its ears at a truck that roared by, passing uncomfortably close. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked like Luke’s battered old Ford, rattling down the road and vanishing around a curve. If it was my stepdad, he definitely wouldn’t have seen us; he’d had a hard time remembering my name even when I’d lived in the same house.

“You tell them the truth,” Ash said, startling me. I wasn’t expecting him to answer. “From the beginning. Either they accept it, or they don’t, but you can’t hide who you are, especially from your family. Best to get it over with—we can deal with whatever happens after.”

His candor surprised me. I was still getting used to this new Ash, this faery who talked and smiled instead of hiding behind an icy wall of indifference. Ever since we were banished from the Nevernever, he’d been more open, less brooding and angst-ridden, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. True, he was still quiet and solemn by anyone’s standards, but for the first time, I felt I was finally getting a glimpse of the Ash I knew was there all along.

“But what if they *can’t* deal with it?” I muttered, voicing the concern that had been plaguing me all morning. “What if they see what I am and freak out? What if they don’t…want me anymore?”

I trailed off at the end, knowing I sounded like a sullen five-year-old. But Ash’s hold on me tightened, and he pulled me closer against him.

“Then you’ll be an orphan, just like me,” he said. “And we’ll find a way to get by.” His lips brushed against my ear, tying my stomach into about a dozen knots. “Together.”

My breath hitched, and I turned my head to kiss him, reaching back to run my hand through his silky dark hair.

The tatter-colt snorted and bucked midstep, not enough to throw me off, but enough to bounce me a few inches straight up. I snatched wildly for its mane as Ash grabbed my waist, keeping me from falling off. Heart pounding, I shot a glare between the tatter-colt’s ears, resisting the urge to kick it in the ribs and give it another excuse to buck me off. It raised its

head and glared back at us, eyes glowing crimson, disgust written plainly on its equine face.

I wrinkled my nose at it. “Oh, excuse me, are we making you uncomfortable?” I asked sarcastically, and it snorted. “Fine. We’ll behave.”

Ash chuckled but didn’t attempt to pull me back. I sighed and gazed at the road over the colt’s bobbing head, looking for familiar landmarks. My heart leaped when I saw a rusty van sitting in the trees off the side of the road, so ancient and corroded a tree had grown through the roof. It had been there for as long as I could remember, and I saw it every day on the bus to and from school. It always told me when I was nearly home.

It seemed so long ago, now—a lifetime ago—that I’d sat on the bus with my friend Robbie, when all I had to worry about was grades and homework and getting my driver’s permit. So much had changed; it would feel strange returning to school and my old, mundane life like nothing had happened. “I’ll probably have to repeat a year,” I sighed, and felt Ash’s puzzled gaze on my neck. Of course, being an immortal faery, he didn’t have to worry about school and licenses and—

I stopped as reality seemed to descend on me all at once. My time in the Nevernever was like a dream, hazy and ethereal, but we were back in the real world now. Where I had to worry about homework and grades and getting into college. I’d wanted to get a summer job and save up for a car. I’d wanted to attend ITT Tech after high school, maybe move to the Baton Rouge or New Orleans campuses when I graduated. Could I still do that? Even after everything that happened? And where would a dark, exiled faery prince fit into all of this?

“What is it?” Ash’s breath tickled the back of my ear, making me shiver.

I took a deep breath. “How is this going to work, Ash?” I half turned to face him. “Where will we be a year from now, two years from now? I can’t stay here forever—sooner or later, I’m going to have to get on with my life. School, work, college someday…” I broke off and looked down at my hands. “I have to move on eventually, but I don’t want to do any of those things without you.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Ash replied. I glanced up at him, and he surprised me with a brief smile. “You have your whole life ahead of you. It makes sense that you should plan for the future. And I figure,

Goodfellow pretended to be mortal for sixteen years. There's no reason I can't do the same."

I blinked at him. "Really?"

He touched my cheek softly, his eyes intense as they gazed into mine. "You might have to teach me a little about the human world, but I'm willing to learn if it means being close to you." He smiled again, a wry quirk of his lips. "I'm sure I can adapt to 'being human,' if I must. If you want me to attend classes as a student, I can do that. If you want to move to a large city to pursue your dreams, I will follow. And if, someday, you wish to be married in a white gown and make this official in human eyes, I'm willing to do that, too." He leaned in, close enough for me to see my reflection in his silver gaze. "For better or worse, I'm afraid you're stuck with me now."

I felt breathless, not knowing what to say. I wanted to thank him, but those words didn't mean the same in faery terms. I wanted to lean in the rest of the way and kiss him, but the tatter-colt would probably throw me into the ditch if I tried. "Ash," I began, but was saved a response as the tatter-colt abruptly came to a full stop at the end of a long gravel driveway that stretched away over a short rise. A familiar green mailbox balanced precariously on its post at the end of the drive, faded with age and time, but I had no trouble reading it, even in the darkness.

Chase. 14202

My heart stood still. I was home.

I slid off the tatter-colt's back and stumbled as I hit the ground, my legs feeling weird and shaky after being on horseback for so long. Ash dismounted with ease, murmuring something to the tatter-colt, which snorted, threw up its head and bounded into the darkness. In seconds, it had disappeared.

I gazed up the long gravel road, my heart pounding in my chest. Home and family waited just beyond that rise: the old green farmhouse with paint peeling off the wood, the pig barns out back through the mud, Luke's truck and Mom's station wagon in the driveway.

Ash moved up beside me, making no noise on the rocks. "Are you ready?"

No, I wasn't. I peered into the darkness where the tatter-colt had vanished instead. "What happened to our ride?" I asked, to distract myself from what I had to do. "What did you say to it?"

“I told him the favor has been paid and that we’re even now.” For some reason, this seemed to amuse him; he gazed after the colt with a faint smile on his lips. “It appears I can’t order them around like I used to. I’ll have to rely on calling in favors from now on.”

“Is that bad?”

The smile twitched into a smirk. “A lot of people owe me.” When I still hesitated, he nodded toward the driveway. “Go on. Your family is waiting.”

“What about you?”

“It’s probably better if you go alone this time.” A flicker of regret passed through his eyes, and he gave me a pained smile. “I don’t think your brother would be happy to see me again.”

“But—”

“I’ll be close.” He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ears. “Promise.”

I sighed and gazed up the driveway once more. “All right,” I muttered, steeling myself for the inevitable. “Here goes nothing.”

I took three steps, feeling the gravel crunch under my feet, and glanced over my shoulder. The empty road mocked me, the breeze stirring up leaves in the spot Ash had been. *Typical faery.* I shook my head and continued my solitary trek up the driveway.

It wasn’t long before I reached the top of the rise, and there, in all its rustic glory, was the house I’d lived in for ten years. I could see lights on in the window, and my family moving about in the kitchen. There was Mom’s slender frame, bent over the sink, and Luke in his faded overalls, putting a stack of dirty plates on the counter. And if I squinted hard enough, I could just see the top of Ethan’s curly head, poking over the kitchen table.

Tears pricked my eyes. After a year of being away, fighting faeries, discovering who I was, cheating death more times than I cared to remember, I was finally home.

“Isn’t that precious,” a voice hissed.

I spun, looking around wildly.

“Up here, princess.”

I looked straight up, and my vision was filled with a thin, shimmering net an instant before it struck me and sent me tumbling back. Cursing, I thrashed and tore at the threads, trying to rip through the flimsy barrier.

Stinging pain made me gasp. Blood streamed down my hands, and I squinted at the threads. The net was actually made of fine, flexible wire, and my struggles had sliced my fingers open.

Harsh laughter caught my attention, and I craned my neck up, searching for my assailants. On the lone set of power lines that stretched to the roof of the house perched three bulbous creatures with spindly legs that glinted under the moonlight. My heart gave a violent lurch when, as one, they unfurled and leaped from the lines, landing in the gravel with faint clicking sounds. Straightening, they scuttled toward me.

I recoiled, tangling myself even further in the wire net. Now that I saw them clearly, they reminded me of giant spiders, only somehow even more horrible. Their spindly legs were huge needles, shiny and pointed as they skittered over the ground. But their upper bodies were of gaunt, emaciated women with pale skin and bulging black eyes. Their arms were made of wire, and long, needlelike fingers uncurled like claws as they approached, their legs clicking over the gravel.

"Here she is," hissed one as they surrounded me, grinning. "Just as the king said she would be."

"Too easy," rasped another, peering at me with a bulbous black eye. "I'm rather disappointed. I thought she would be a good catch, but she's just a skinny little bug, trapped in a web. What is the king so afraid of?"

"The king," I said, and all three blinked at me, surprised I was talking to them instead of cringing in fear, perhaps. "You mean the false king, don't you? He's still after me."

The spider-hags hissed, baring pointed teeth. "Do not blaspheme him so, child!" one screeched, grabbing the net and pulling me forward. "He is not the *false* king! He is the Iron King, the true monarch of the Iron fey!"

"Not from what I heard," I retorted, meeting the blazing black eyes full on. "I've met the Iron King, the real Iron King, Machina. Or have you forgotten him?"

"Of course we haven't!" hissed the hag's sister. "We will never forget Machina. He wanted to make you his queen, queen of all the Iron fey, and you killed him for his trouble."

"He kidnapped my brother and was planning to destroy the Nevernever!" I snapped in return. "But you're missing the point. The king you serve, the one who took over the throne, is an imposter. He isn't the real heir. You're supporting a false king."

“Lies!” the hags screeched, crowding in, grabbing me with pointed needle claws, drawing blood. “Who told you this? Who dares blaspheme the name of the new king?”

“Ironhorse,” I said, wincing as one snatched my hair, shaking my head back and forth. “Ironhorse told me, Machina’s lieutenant himself.”

“The traitor fey! He and the rebels will be destroyed, right after the king takes care of you!”

The spider-hags were shrieking now, shouting curses and threats, tearing at me through the wire net. One of them tightened her grip in my hair and lifted me off my feet. I gasped, tears of pain flooding my eyes as the faery hissed in my face.

A flash of cold blue light erupted between us. The Iron faery gave a shriek and…*disintegrated*, becoming thousands of tiny slivers that rained down around me. They glimmered in the darkness, needles and pins catching the moonlight as the spider-hag departed the world in the manner of her kind. The other two wailed and drew back as something tore the net off me and stepped between us.

“Are you all right?” Ash growled as I staggered to my feet, his gaze never leaving the hags in front of him. My scalp burned, my fingers still bled, and a dozen tiny scratches covered my arms from the hag’s claws, but I wasn’t badly hurt.

“I’m fine,” I told him, a slow anger building in my chest. I felt my glamour rise like a tornado, swirling with emotion and energy. When I’d first met Mab, the Winter Queen had sealed my magic away, afraid of my power, but the seal had been broken and I could feel the pulse of glamour once more. It was everywhere around me, savage and wild, the magic of Oberon and the Summer fey.

“You killed our sister!” the hags screeched, tearing at their own hair. “We’ll slice you to pieces!” Hissing, they scuttled toward us with raised claws. I felt a ripple of glamour from Ash, colder than the fiery magic of Summer, and the Winter prince swept his arm forward.

A burst of blue light, and one of the hags skittered into a hail of ice-daggers, the pointed shards ripping through her like shrapnel. She wailed and fell apart, scattering into thousands of glittering pieces in the grass. Ash brandished his sword and charged the last one.

The remaining spider-hag screamed her fury and raised her arms. Ten shimmering lengths of wire seemed to grow from her needle-tip fingers.

She sliced them toward Ash, who ducked, and the wires cut a nearby sapling into pieces. As he danced around her, I knelt and buried my hands in the dirt, calling up my glamour. I felt the pulse of living things deep in the earth and sent a request into the ground, asking for aid in defeating the iron monster on the surface.

The spider-hag was so busy trying to slice Ash to ribbons, she was taken completely by surprise when the ground erupted at her feet. Grass and weeds, vines and roots wrapped around her spindly legs and crawled up her torso. She shrieked and flailed with her deadly wires, slicing vegetation like an angry weed-whacker, but I poured more glamour into the ground, and the plants responded like they were growing in fast-forward. Panicked, the spider-hag tried to flee, ripping through vegetation as it twined around her legs, dragging her down.

A dark form blurred the air above her as Ash dropped from the sky, his blade pointed straight down. It struck the faery's bulbous torso, pinning her to the earth for a split second, before she shivered into an enormous needle pile and scattered over the ground.

I sighed with relief and stood, but suddenly the ground tilted. The trees began to spin, all feeling left my legs and arms, and the next thing I knew the ground rushed up at me.

I woke lying on my back, feeling breathless and faint as if I'd just run a marathon. Ash was peering down at me, silver eyes bright with concern.

"Meghan, are you all right? What happened?"

The dizziness was fading. I took several deep breaths to make sure my gut stayed where it was supposed to, and sat up to face him.

"I…don't know. I used my glamour, and just…passed out." Dammit, the ground was still spinning. I leaned into Ash, who held me cautiously, as if afraid I would break. "Is that normal?" I muttered against his chest.

"Not that I know of." He sounded troubled, worried but trying not to show it. "Perhaps it's a side effect from having your magic sealed for so long."

Well, that was another thing I'd have to thank Mab for. Ash stood, carefully drawing me up with him. My arms stung, and my fingers were sticky from where I'd sliced myself on the wire net. Ash tore strips from his shirt and wrapped them around my hands, silent and efficient, though his touch was gentle.

“They were waiting for me,” I murmured, gazing at the thousands of needles scattered through the yard, glittering in the moonlight. More problems the fey had brought to my family. Mom and Luke would probably have a fit, and I desperately hoped Ethan wouldn’t accidentally step on one before they had a chance to disappear. “They know where I live,” I continued, watching the slivers wink at me in the grass. “The false king knew I’d be coming home, and he sent them…” My gaze rose to my house, and my family moving about through the windows, unaware of the chaos outside.

I felt cold. And sick. “I can’t go home,” I whispered, feeling Ash’s gaze on me. “Not now. I can’t bring this madness home to my family.” I stared at the house for a moment more, then shut my eyes. “The false king won’t stop here. He’ll keep sending things after me, and my family will get caught in the middle. I can’t let that happen. I…I have to leave. Now.”

“Where will you go?” Ash’s steady voice broke through my despair. “We can’t go back to Faery, and the Iron fey are everywhere in the mortal world.”

“I don’t know.” I covered my face with my hands. All I knew was that I couldn’t be with my family, I couldn’t go home, and I couldn’t have a normal life. Not until the false king gave up looking for me, or miraculously keeled over and died.

Or *I* keeled over and died. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?” I groaned through my fingers. “No matter where I go, they’re going to follow me.”

Strong fingers wrapped around my wrists and gently tugged my hands down. I shivered and looked up into glittering silver eyes. “I will keep fighting for you,” Ash said in a low, intense voice. “Do what you must. I’ll be here, whatever you decide. If it takes one year or a thousand, I will keep you safe.”

My heart pounded. Ash released my wrists and slid his hands up my arms, pulling me close. I sank into his embrace and buried my face in his chest, using him as a shield against disappointment and grief, against the knowledge that my wandering wasn’t over yet. The choice loomed clear before me. If I ever wanted this endless running and fighting to stop, I would have to deal with the Iron King. Again.

I opened my eyes and stared at the place where the Iron fey had fallen, at the slivers of metal glinting in the weeds. The thought of such monsters stealing into my room, turning their murderous eyes on Ethan or my mom,

made me cold with rage. *All right,* I thought, clenching my fists in Ash's shirt, *the false king wants a war? I'll give him one.*

I wasn't ready. Not yet. I had to get stronger. I had to learn to control my magic, both Summer and Iron glamour, if it was actually possible to learn both. And for that, I needed time. I needed a place where the Iron fey couldn't follow. And there was only one place I knew that was safe, where the false king's servants would never find me.

Ash must've sensed the change. "Where are we going?" he murmured into my hair.

I took a deep breath and pulled back to face him. "Leanansidhe's."

Surprise and a flicker of alarm crossed his face. "The Exile Queen? Are you sure she'll help us?"

No, I wasn't. The Exile Queen, as she was called among other things, was capricious and unpredictable and, frankly, quite terrifying. But she had helped me before, and her home in the Between—the veil separating the mortal world from Faery—was the only potentially safe haven we had.

Besides, I had a score to settle with Leanansidhe, and more than a few questions I needed answered.

Ash was still watching me, his silver gaze concerned. "I don't know," I told him truthfully. "But she's the only one I can think of who can help, and she hates the Iron fey with a fiery passion. Besides, she *is* Queen of the Exiles. That means we qualify, right?"

"You tell me." Ash crossed his arms and leaned against a tree. "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her. Though I have heard the stories. Terrifying as they are." A tiny furrow creased his brow, and he sighed. "This is going to be very dangerous, isn't it?"

"Probably."

A rueful smile quirked his lips. "Where to first?"

A cold resolve tightened my stomach. I looked back at my home, at my family, so very close, and swallowed the lump in my throat. *Not yet,* I promised them, *but soon. Soon, I'll be able to see you again.* "New Orleans," I replied, turning to Ash, who waited patiently, his eyes never leaving my face. "The Historic Voodoo Museum. There's something there I have to take back."

CHAPTER TWO
OF TOKENS AND CHURCH GRIMS

Any tour guide worth his badge in New Orleans will tell you not to go gallivanting around the city streets alone in the middle of the night. In the heart of the French Quarter, where street lamps and tourism had a firm hold, it was fairly safe, but just outside the district, the dark alleyways hid thugs and gangs and predators of the night.

I wasn't worried about the human predators. They couldn't see us, except for one white-haired homeless man who cringed against a wall and chanted "Not here, not here," as we went by. But the darkness hid other things as well, like the goat-headed phouka who watched us from an alley across the street, grinning madly, and the redcap gang who trailed us through several neighborhoods until they got bored and went looking for easier prey. New Orleans was a faery city; mystery, imagination and old traditions blended perfectly here and drew scores of exiled fey to this spot.

Ash walked next to me, a silent, watchful shadow, one hand resting casually on his sword hilt. Everything, from his eyes, to the chill in the air as he passed, to the calm lethality on his face, was a warning: this wasn't someone you wanted to mess around with. Even though he had been exiled and was no longer a prince of the Unseelie Court, he was an imposing warrior, still the son of Queen Mab, and few dared challenge him.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself as we ventured deeper into the back alleys of the French Quarter, moving steadily toward our goal. But at the mouth of a narrow alley, the redcap gang I thought had given up appeared, blocking the exit. They were short and stout, evil dwarves with bloody red hats, their eyes and jagged fangs shining in the darkness.

Ash stopped and in one smooth motion eased me behind him and drew his sword, bathing the alley in flickering blue light. I clenched my fists, drawing glamour from the air, tasting fear and apprehension and a hint of violence. As I drew the glamour to me, I felt the nausea and dizziness and fought to remain steady on my feet.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Ash gave a dark, humorless chuckle and stepped forward. “We can stand around looking at each other all night,” he said, locking gazes with the biggest redcap, who had a stained red bandana on his head and was missing an eye. “Or would you like me to start the massacre?”

One-Eye bared his fangs. “Keep your pants on, prince,” he spat, his guttural voice like a dog’s snarl. “We got no quarrel with you.” He sniffed and brushed his crooked nose. “Just heard the rumor you was in town, see, and we’d like to have a few words with the lady before you go, that’s all.”

I was instantly suspicious. I had no love for redcaps; the ones I’d run into were trying to kidnap, torture, or eat me. They were the mercenaries and thugs of the Unseelie Court, and the exiled ones were even worse. I wanted nothing to do with them.

Ash kept his sword out, his eyes never leaving the redcaps, but his free hand reached back and gripped mine. “Fine. Say what you came to say and get out of here.”

One-Eye sneered at him, then turned to me. “Just wanted to let you know, *princess*—” he emphasized the word with a toothy leer “—that there’s a bunch of Iron faeries sniffing around the city looking for you. One of them is offering a reward for any information concerning your whereabouts. So I’d be really careful if I were you.” One-Eye pulled off his bandana and gave me a ridiculous, mocking bow. “Just thought you’d want to know.”

I tried to hide my shock. Not that the Iron fey were looking for me, that was a given, but that a redcap would take it upon himself to warn me about it. “Why are you telling me this?”

“And how can I be certain *you* won’t run to them with our location?” Ash chimed in, his voice flat and cold.

The redcap leader gave Ash a half disgusted, half fearful look. “You think I want these Iron bastards on my turf? You really think I’d want to *bargain* with them? I want every one of them dead, or at least out of my territory. I sure as hell ain’t going to give them exactly what they want. If there’s any way I can throw a wrench in their plans, I’ll take it, even if that means warning *you* to spite *them.* And if you manage to kill them all for me, hey—that’ll make my evening.”

He stared at me with a hopeful expression. I squirmed uncomfortably. “I’m not going to promise anything,” I warned, “so you can stop threatening me.”

“Who said I was threatening you?” One-Eye held up his hands with a quick glance at Ash. “I’m just giving you a friendly warning. I thought, hey, she’s killed the Iron bastards before. She might want to do it again.”

“Who told you that?”

“Oh, please. It’s all over the streets. We know about you—you and your Unseelie boyfriend here.” He curled a lip at Ash, who stared back stoically. “We heard about the scepter, and how you killed the Iron bitch who stole it. We know you returned it to Mab to stop the war between Summer and Winter, and that they exiled you for your trouble.” One-Eye shook his head and gave me a look that was almost sympathetic. “Word travels fast on the streets, princess, especially when the Iron fey are running around like chickens with their heads ripped off, offering rewards for ‘the daughter of the Summer King.’ So, I’d watch my back, if I were you.”

He snorted, then turned and spat on one of his flunky’s shoes. The other redcap snarled and cursed, but One-Eye didn’t seem to notice. “Anyway, there it is. Last time I checked, the bastards were nosing around Bourbon Street. If you do manage to kill them, princess, tell them One-Eyed Jack says hello. Let’s go, boys.”

“Aw, boss.” The redcap who was spit on smiled at me and licked his fangs. “Can’t we chew on the princess, just a little?”

One-Eyed Jack slapped the offending faery upside the head without looking at him. “Idiot,” he snapped. “I have no desire to pick your frozen guts off the pavement. Now move, you stupid lot. Before I lose my temper.”

The redcap leader grinned at me, gave Ash one last sneer, and backed away. Snapping and arguing with each other, the redcap gang ambled into the darkness and vanished from sight.

I looked at Ash. “You know, there was a time I wished I could be so popular.”

He sheathed his sword. “Should we stop for the night?”

“No.” I rubbed my arms, dropping the glamour and the queasiness that came with it, and peered into the street. “I can’t run and hide just because the Iron fey are looking for me. I’d never get anywhere. Let’s keep moving.”

Ash nodded. “We’re almost there.”

We reached our destination without further incident. The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum looked exactly how I remembered it, faded black doors sunk into the wall. The wooden sign creaked on its chains overhead.

"Ash," I murmured as we walked quietly to the doors. "I've been thinking." The encounter with the spider-hags and the redcaps had strengthened my convictions, and I was ready to voice my plans. "I want you to do something for me, if you would."

"Whatever you need." We reached the doors, and Ash peered in the window. The interior of the museum was dark. He scanned the area around us before turning to place a hand on one of the doors. "I'm still listening, Meghan," he murmured. "What do you want me to do?"

I took a breath. "Teach me how to fight."

He turned back, his eyebrows raised. I took advantage of the moment of silence and plunged on before he could protest. "I mean it, Ash. I'm tired of standing on the sidelines doing nothing, watching you fight for me. I want to learn to defend myself. Will you teach me?" He frowned and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, I added, "And don't give me any crap about defending my honor, or how a girl can't use a weapon, or how it's too dangerous for me to fight. How am I going to beat the false king if I can't even swing a sword?"

"I was *going* to say," Ash continued in what was almost a solemn voice, if it wasn't for the faint smirk on his lips, "that I thought it was a good idea. In fact, I was going to suggest picking up a weapon for you after we're done here."

"Oh," I said in a small voice. Ash sighed.

"We have a lot of enemies," he continued. "And as much as I hate it, there might be times when I won't be there to help you. Learning to fight and use glamour will be crucial now. I was trying to think of a way to suggest teaching you without having it blow up in my face." He smiled then, a tiny twitch of his lips, and shook his head. "I suppose I was doomed either way."

"Oh," I said again, in an even smaller voice. "Well…good. As long as we understand each other." I was glad the darkness hid my burning face, though knowing Ash, he could probably see it anyway.

Still smiling, Ash turned back to the door, placing a hand on the faded wood and speaking a quiet word under his breath. The door clicked and

slowly swung open.

The interior of the museum was musty and warm. As we eased through the door, I tripped over the same bump in the carpet that had been there a year ago and stumbled into Ash. He steadied me with a sigh, just like a year ago. Only this time, he reached down and touched my hand, moving close to whisper in my ear.

"First lesson," he said, and even in the darkness I heard the amusement in his voice. "Always be aware of where you put your feet."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "I'll remember that."

He turned away and tossed a ball of faery fire into existence. The glowing, blue-white sphere hovered overhead, illuminating the room and the macabre collection of voodoo items surrounding us. The skeleton in the top hat and the mannequin with the alligator head still grinned at us along the wall. But now, an ancient, mummylike figure had been added to the duo, a shriveled old woman with hollow pits for eyes and arms like brittle sticks.

Then the withered face turned and smiled at me, and I bit down a yelp.

"Hello, Meghan Chase," the oracle whispered, gliding away from the wall and her two ghastly bodyguards. "I knew you would return."

Ash didn't go for his sword, but I sensed muscles coiling beneath his skin. I took a deep breath to calm my pounding heart and stepped forward. "Then you know why I'm here."

The oracle's eyeless gaze peered at my face. "You seek to take back what you gave away a year ago. That which did not seem so important then has become very dear to you now. Such is always the case. You mortals do not know what you have until it is gone."

"The memory of my father." I moved away from Ash, closing the distance between me and the oracle. Her hollow gaze followed me, and the smell of dusty newspapers clogged my nose and mouth as I approached. "I want it back. I need it if…if I'm going to see him again at Leanansidhe's. I have to know what he means to me. Please."

The knowledge of that mistake was still painful. When I was first searching for my brother, we'd come to the oracle for help. She'd agreed to help us, but asked for a memory in return; it had sounded insignificant at the time. I had agreed to her price, and afterward had had no clue which memory she took.

Then, we'd met Leanansidhe, who kept several humans in her home in the Between. All her humans were artists of some sort, brilliant, talented, and slightly mad from living in the Between so long. One of them, a gifted pianist, had taken quite an interest in me, though I hadn't known who he was. I found out only after we had left the manor and it was too late to go back.

My father. My human father, or at least the man who'd raised me until I was six, and he disappeared. That was the memory the oracle had taken: all recollections of my human dad. And now, I needed them back. If I was going to Leanansidhe's, I wanted the memory of my father intact when I demanded to know why she had him in the first place.

"Your father is Oberon, the Summer King," the oracle whispered, her thin mouth pulled into a smile. "This man you seek, this human, is no blood relation to you. He is a mere mortal. A stranger. Why do you care?"

"I don't know," I said miserably. "I don't know if I *should* care, and I want to be sure. Who was he? Why did he leave us? Why is he with Leanansidhe now?" I broke off and stared at the oracle, feeling Ash come up behind me as silent support. "I have to know," I whispered. "I need that memory back."

The oracle tapped glittering nails together, considering. "The bargain was fair," she rasped. "One exchange for another, we both agreed to this. I cannot simply give you what you seek." She sniffed, looking momentarily indignant. "I will have something in return."

I figured. Can't expect a faery to do you a favor without naming a price. Squashing down my annoyance, I stole a glance at Ash, and saw him nod. He'd expected it, too. I sighed and turned back to the oracle. "What do you want?"

She tapped a nail against her chin, dislodging a few flakes of dead skin or dust. I wrinkled my nose and eased back a step. "Hmm, let us see. What would the girl be willing to part with. Perhaps…your future chi—"

"No," Ash and I said in unison. She snorted.

"Can't blame me for trying. Very well." She leaned forward, studying me with the empty holes in her face. I felt a presence brush lightly against my mind and recoiled, shutting her out.

The oracle hissed, filling the air with the smell of decay. "How… interesting," she mused. I waited, but she didn't elaborate, and after a moment she drew back with a strange smile on her withered face. "Very

well, Meghan Chase, this is my request. You are loathe to give up anything you hold dear, and it would be a waste of breath to ask for those things. So, instead I will ask that you fetch me something someone else held dear."

I blinked at her. "What?"

"I wish for you to bring me a Token. Surely that is not too much to ask."

"Um…" I cast a helpless glance at Ash. "What's a token?"

The oracle sighed. "Still so naive." She gave Ash an almost motherly frown. "I trust you will teach her better than this in the future, young prince. Now, listen to me, Meghan Chase, and I will share a bit of faery lore. Most items," she continued, plucking a skull from a table with her bony talons, "are just that. Mundane, ordinary, commonplace. Nothing special. However…" She replaced the skull with a *thunk* and carefully picked up a small leather bag, tied with a leather thong. I heard the rattle of pebbles or bones within as she held it up. "Certain items have been so loved and cherished by mortals that they become something else entirely—a symbol of that emotion, whether it be love, hate, pride, or fear. A favored doll, or an artist's masterpiece. And sometimes, though rarely, the item becomes so important that it grows a life of its own. It's as if a bit of the human's soul was left behind, clinging to the once-ordinary article. We fey call these items Tokens, and they are highly sought after, for they radiate a special glamour that never fades away." The oracle stepped back, seeming to fade into the paraphernalia lining the walls. "Find me a Token, Meghan Chase," she whispered, "and I will give you back your memory."

And then she was gone.

I rubbed my arms and turned to Ash, who bore a thoughtful expression. He stared after the vanished oracle. "Great," I muttered. "So, we need to find a Token thing. I suppose they're not just lying around for the taking, huh? Any ideas?"

He roused himself and glanced down at me. "I might know where we can find one," he mused, suddenly solemn again. "But it's not a place humans like to visit, especially at night."

I laughed. "What, you don't think I can handle it?" He raised an eyebrow, and I frowned. "Ash, I've been through Arcadia, Tir Na Nog, the Briars, the Between, the Iron Realm, Machina's tower, and the killing fields of the Nevernever. I don't think there's a place capable of freaking me out anymore."

A trace of humor touched his eyes, a silent challenge. “All right, then,” he said, leading me out. “Follow me.”

* * *

The City of the Dead stretched away before me, stark and black under the swollen yellow moon, steaming in the humid air. Rows upon rows of crypts, tombs, and mausoleums lined the narrow streets, some lovingly decorated with flowers, candles, and plaques, others crumbling with age and neglect. Some of them looked like miniature houses, or even tiny cathedrals, spires and stone crosses raking the sky. Statues of angels and weeping women peered down from rooftops, looking stern or in the throes of grief. Their hollow eyes seemed to follow me down the tomb-lined alleyways.

I really have to learn to keep my mouth shut, I thought, trailing Ash through the narrow streets, my skin crawling with every noise and suspicious-looking shadow. A warm breeze whispered between crypts, kicking up dust and causing dead leaves to skitter along the ground. My overactive imagination kicked into high gear, seeing zombies shuffling between the rows, the tomb doors creaking open as skeletal hands reached out for us. I shuddered and pressed closer to Ash who, damn him, seemed quite unfazed about walking through a New Orleans cemetery in the dead of night. I sensed his secret amusement at my expense, and so help me, if he said anything along the lines of *I told you so* I was going to smack him.

There are no ghosts here, I told myself, my gaze flickering between the rows of crypts. *No ghosts, no zombies, no men with hook-hands waiting to ambush stupid teenagers who come to the cemetery at night. Stop being paranoi—*

I caught a shimmer of movement between the crypts, a flutter of something white and ghostly, a woman in a bloodstained hood and cowl, floating over the ground. My heart nearly stopped, and with a squeak, I grabbed Ash’s sleeve, tugging him to a halt. He turned, and I threw myself into his arms, burying my face in his chest. Pride be damned; I’d kill him later for bringing me here.

“Meghan?” His grip tightened in concern. “What’s wrong?”

“A ghost,” I whispered, frantically pointing in the direction of the specter. “I saw a ghost. Over there.”

He turned to look in that direction, and I felt him relax. “Bean sidhe,” he murmured, sounding like he was trying to stifle his amusement. “It’s not unusual to see them here. They often hang around graveyards after the dead have been buried.”

I peeked up, watching the bean sidhe float away into the darkness. Not a ghost, then. With an indignant huff I pulled back, but not enough to let go. “Aren’t bean sidhes supposed to be off wailing somewhere?” I muttered, scowling at the ghostly look-alike. “Why is she hanging around here?”

“Plenty of glamour to be found in old cemeteries. You can feel it, can’t you?”

Now that he mentioned it, I could. Grief, fear, and despair hung like a thin gray mist over everything, clinging to the stones and crawling along the ground. I took a breath, and the glamour flooded my nose and mouth. I tasted salt and tears and raw, festering grief, mixed with a black fear of death and the dread of the unknown.

“Awful,” I managed, gagging.

Ash nodded. “I don’t much care for it, but several of our kind prefer grief and fear over anything else. So graveyards tend to attract them, especially at night.”

“Like the bean sidhe?”

“Bean sidhe are portents of death and sometimes hang around the site of their last mark.” Ash still hadn’t released his grip. He seemed content to hold me, and I was content to stay there. “But there are others, like bogies and galley beggars, whose sole purpose in life is to frighten mortals. We could see a few of them here, but they won’t bother you if you’re not afraid.”

“Too late,” I muttered, and felt his silent chuckle. Turning, I glowered at him and he stared back innocently. “Just so you know,” I growled, poking his chest, “I *am* going to kill you later for bringing me here.”

“I look forward to it.”

“You wait. You’ll be sorry when something grabs me and I scream loud enough to wake the dead.”

Ash smiled and let me go. “They’ll have to get past me first,” he promised, a steely glint in his eye. “Besides, most things that would grab you are just nursery bogies—irritating but harmless. They only want to scare you.” He sobered, and his eyes narrowed, peering around the

cemetery. “The real threat will be the Grim, assuming this cemetery has one.”

“What’s a Grim?” I immediately thought of Grimalkin, the smart-mouthed talking cat who always seemed to pop up when least expected, demanding favors in return for his help. I wondered where the cat was now, if he had returned to the wyldwood after our last adventure. Of course, being in a cemetery, a Grim might also be a grinning skeleton in a black cowl, gliding down the aisles with a scythe in hand. I shivered and cursed my overactive imagination. So help me, it didn’t matter if Ash was here or not, if I saw *that* coming, people on the other side of the city would hear me scream.

An eerie howl cut through the night, making me jump. Ash froze, lean muscles tightening beneath the fabric of his shirt. A lethal calmness entered his face: his killer’s mask. The cemetery went deathly still, as if even the ghosts and nursery bogies were afraid to move.

“Let me guess. *That* was a Grim.”

Ash’s voice was soft as he turned away. “Let’s go.”

We continued down several more aisles, stone mausoleums flanking us. I peered anxiously between the tombs, wary of bogies and galley beggars and anything else that might jump out at me. I searched for the mysterious Grim, my creeped-out brain imagining werewolves and zombie dogs and scythe-toting skeletons following us down the streets.

Finally, we came to a small stone mausoleum with an ancient cross perched on the roof and a simple wooden door, nothing fancy or extravagant. The tiny plaque on the wall was so faded it was impossible to read. I would’ve walked right past it, if Ash hadn’t stopped.

“Whose tomb is this?” I asked, hanging back from the door as if it would creak open to reveal its grisly contents. Ash walked up the crumbling granite steps and put a hand against the wood.

“An older couple, no one important,” he replied, running his fingers down the faded surface as if he could sense what was on the other side. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced back at me. “Meghan, get up here, now.”

I cringed. “We’re going *inside?*”

“Once I open the door, the Grim will know we’re here. Its duty is to guard the cemetery, and the remains of those in it, so it’s *not* going to be happy about us disturbing the dead. You don’t want to be out here alone when it comes, trust me.”

Heart pounding, I scurried up the steps and pressed close to his back, peering out over the graveyard. “What is this thing, anyway?” I asked. “Can’t you just slice your way past it, or turn us invisible for that matter?”

“It’s not that easy,” Ash explained patiently. “Church Grims are immune to magic and glamour—they see right through it. And even if you kill one, it doesn’t die. To destroy a Grim, you have to dig up and burn its real body, and we don’t have the time.” He turned back to the door, murmured a quiet word, and pushed it open.

A blast of hot air wafted out of the open crypt, along with the musty scent of dust and mold and decay. I gagged and pressed my face into Ash’s shoulder as we eased inside, shutting the door behind us. The tiny room was like an oven; I was almost instantly covered in sweat, and I pressed my sleeve to my mouth. Gasping into the fabric, I tried not to be sick at the scene in the middle of the floor.

On a raised stone table lay two skeletons, side by side. The room was so small that there was barely enough room to skirt the edges of the table, so the bodies were quite close. Too close, in my opinion. The bones were yellowed with age, and nothing clung to them—no skin, hair, or flesh—so they must’ve been here awhile.

I noticed that the skeletons were holding hands, long bony fingers wrapped around each other in a gruesome parody of affection. On one knobby, naked digit, a tarnished ring glinted in the shadows.

Curiosity battled revulsion, and I looked at Ash, who was staring at the couple with a grave expression on his face. “Who are they?” I whispered through my sleeve. Ash hesitated, then took a quiet breath.

“There is a story,” he began in a solemn tone, “about a talented saxophone player who went to Mardi Gras one night and caught the eye of a faery queen. And the queen bid him come to her, because he was young and handsome and charming, and his music could set one’s soul on fire. But the sax player refused, because he already had a wife, and his love for her was greater than even the beauty of the faery queen. And so, angry that he spurned her, the queen took him anyway, and held him in the Nevernever for many long days, forcing him to entertain her. But no matter what the young man saw in Faery, and no matter how much the queen tried to make him her own, even when he forgot his own name, he could not forget his wife back in the mortal world.”

Watching Ash's face, the shadows in his eyes as he spoke, I got the feeling this wasn't a story he'd heard somewhere. This was a tale he'd watched unfold before him. He knew of the Token and where to find it because he remembered the sax player from the queen's court; another mortal caught up in the cruelty of the fey.

"Time passed," Ash went on, "and the queen finally released him, because it amused her to do so. And when the young human, his head filled with memories both real and imagined, returned to his beloved wife, he found her aged sixty years, while he had not changed a day since he vanished from the mortal world. She still wore his ring, and had not taken another husband or suitor, for she always believed he would return."

Ash paused, and I used my free hand to wipe my eyes. The skeletons didn't seem so creepy now, lying motionless on the table. At least I could look at them without my stomach churning. "What happened after that?" I whispered, glancing at Ash hopefully, pleading for this faery tale to have a happy ending. Or at least a nonhorrible one. I should've known better by now. Ash shook his head and sighed.

"Neighbors found them days later lying in bed, a young man and a shrunken old woman, their fingers intertwined in an unbreakable grip and their faces turned toward one another. The blood from their wrists had already dried on the sheets."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked at the skeletons again, fingers interlocked in death as they had been in life. And I wished that, for *once,* faery tales—*real* faery tales, not Disney fairy tales—would have a happy ending.

I wonder what my ending will be? The thought came out of nowhere, making me frown. I looked at Ash over the table; his silver gaze met mine, and I felt my heart swell in my chest. I was in a faery tale, wasn't I? I was playing my part in the story, the human girl who had fallen in love with a faery prince. Stories like that rarely ended well. Even if I did finish this thing with the false king, even if I did go back to my family and live out a normal life, where would Ash fit in? I was human; he was an immortal, soulless faery. What kind of future did we have together? I would eventually grow old and die; Ash would live on forever, or at least until the mortal world became too much for him and he simply ceased to exist.

I closed my eyes, my heart aching with the bitter truth. He didn't belong here, in the mortal world. He belonged back in Faery, with the other

creatures of myth and nightmares and imagination. Ash was a beautiful, impossible dream: a faery tale. And I, despite my father's blood, was still human.

"Meghan?" His voice was soft, questioning. "What is it?"

Suddenly angry, I cut off my bleak thoughts. No. I would not accept that. This was my story, *our* story. I would find a way for us both to live, to be happy. I owed Ash that much.

Something landed on the roof overhead with a hollow thud, and a shower of dust filtered over me. Coughing, I waved my hand in front of my face, squinting in the sudden rain of filth.

"What was that?"

Ash glanced at the roof, eyes narrowing. "Our signal to leave. Here." He tossed something at me over the table. It glimmered briefly as I caught it—the tarnished gold ring from the skeleton's finger. "There's your Token," Ash muttered, and I saw his hand dart into his coat pocket, almost too quick to be seen, before he stepped away from the table. "Let's get out of here."

He pulled the door open, motioning me out. As I ducked through the frame, something dripped onto my shoulder from above, something warm and wet and slimy. I put my hand to my neck, and it came away covered in frothy drool.

Heart in my throat, I looked back and up.

A monstrous shape crouched atop the mausoleum, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, something lean and muscular and decidedly unnatural. Trembling, I gazed up into the burning crimson eyes of an enormous black dog, big as a cow, lips pulled back to reveal fangs as long as dinner knives.

"Ash," I squeaked, backing away. The monster dog's eyes followed me, their burning glare fastened on the hand where I clutched the ring. "Is that —?"

Ash's sword rasped free. "The Grim." The Grim glanced at him and snarled, making the ground tremble, then swung its terrifying gaze back to me. Muscles rippled under its slick coat as it crouched lower, drool hanging in glistening ribbons from its teeth. Ash brandished his sword, speaking to me though he never took his eyes from the Grim. "Meghan, when I say 'go,' run *forward*, not away from it. Understand?"

That sounded very much like suicide, but I trusted Ash. "Yeah," I whispered, clenching the ring tighter, feeling the edges dig into my palm.

“I’m ready.”

The Grim howled, an earsplitting bay that split my head open, making me want to cover my ears and close my eyes. It leaped, and I would’ve been frozen to the spot if Ash hadn’t snapped me out of it by yelling, *“Go!”* Spurred into action, I dove forward, beneath the dog hurtling over my head, and felt the crushing impact as the Grim hit the spot where I had been standing.

“Run!” Ash yelled at me. “We have to get off the cemetery grounds, now!”

Behind us, the Grim roared in fury and attacked.

CHAPTER THREE
MEMORY

A hail of glittering shards erupted from Ash's direction, pelting the Grim with frozen daggers and stinging bits of ice. They shattered or glanced off the Grim's muscular hide, not injuring the beast, but it was enough to buy us a few seconds' head start. We fled down the aisles, dashing between crypts, ducking around statues of angels and saints, the hot breath of the Grim at our heels. If we had been in the open, the monstrous dog would've run me down and used me as a chew toy in three seconds flat, but the narrow streets and tight corridors slowed it down a bit. We zigzagged our way through the cemetery, staying one step ahead of the Grim, until the white concrete wall that marked the cemetery grounds loomed ahead of us.

Ash reached the barrier first and whirled to help me up, positioning himself as a step stool. Expecting to feel teeth on my back at any moment, I stepped onto his knee and launched myself for the top, clawing and kicking. Ash leaped straight up, like he was attached to wires, and landed on the edge, grabbing my arm.

A deafening howl made my ears ring, and I made the mistake of looking back. The Grim's open maw filled my vision, breath hot and foul in my face, spraying me with drool. Ash yanked me backward just as those jaws snapped inches from my face, and we fell off the wall together, hitting the ground with a jolt that knocked the breath from my lungs.

Gasping, I looked up. The Grim crouched at the top of the wall, glaring at me, fangs bared and shiny in the moonlight. For a moment, I was sure it would leap down and rip us both to pieces. But, with one last snarl, it turned and dropped out of sight, back to the cemetery it was bound to protect.

Ash let out a breath and let his head fall back to the grass. "I will say this," he panted, his eyes closed and his face turned toward the sky. "Being with you is never boring."

I opened my shaking fist and looked down at the ring still lying in my palm. It glowed with its own inner light, surrounded by an aura of glamour that shimmered with emotion: deep blue sorrow, emerald hope, and scarlet

love. Now that I saw it clearly, I felt a stab of remorse and guilt; this was the symbol of a love that had endured for decades, and we had taken it from the grave with barely a second thought.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and stuck the ring in my jeans pocket. Wiping disgusting Grim drool off my face, I glanced down at Ash.

He opened his eyes, and I suddenly realized how close we were. I was practically lying on top of him, our limbs tangled together and our faces inches apart. My heart stuttered a bit, then picked up faster than before. Ever since our exile from Faery and my journey home, we had never *been together,* really been together. I'd been so preoccupied with what I would say to my family, so anxious to get home, that I hadn't given it much thought. And Ash never went any further than a brief touch or caress, seeming content to let me set the pace. Only I didn't know what he wanted, what he expected. What did we *have,* exactly?

"You're worried again." Ash narrowed his eyes, and the nearness of him made me catch my breath. "It seems you're always worried, and I can't do anything to help."

I scowled at him. "You could stop reading my emotions every time I turn around," I said, feigning irritation, when in reality my heart was beating so hard I knew he had to feel it. "If it bothers you so much, you could find something else to focus on."

"Can't help it." He sounded annoyingly cavalier, completely self-assured and comfortable, lying there on his back. "The more we're connected to our chosen someone, the more we can pick up on what they're feeling. It's instinctive, like breathing."

"You can't hold your breath?"

One corner of his mouth twitched. "I suppose I could block it out, if I tried."

"Uh-huh. But you're not going to, are you?"

"No." Serious again, he reached up and ran his fingers through my hair, and for a moment I forgot to breathe. "I want to know when you're worried, when you're angry or happy or sad. You can probably do the same to me, though I'm slightly better at shielding my emotions. More practice." A shadow crossed his face, a flicker of pain, before it was gone. "Unfortunately, the longer we're together, the harder hiding it will become, for both of us." He shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "One of the hazards of having a faery in love with you."

I kissed him. His arms slid around me and drew me close, and we stayed like that for a while, my hands tangled in his hair, his cool lips on mine. My earlier thoughts in the crypt came back to haunt me, and I shoved them into the darkest corner of my mind. I would not give him up. I would find a way to have a happy ending, for both of us.

For a few seconds, my world shrank down to this tiny spot, with Ash's heartbeat under my fingers, me breathing in his breath. But then he grunted softly and pulled back, his expression caught between amusement and caution. "We have an audience," he murmured, and I jerked upright, looking around warily. The night was still and quiet, but a large gray cat sat on the wall with his tail curled around himself, watching us with amused golden eyes.

I leaped up, my face burning. "Grimalkin!" I glared at the cat, who regarded me blandly. "Dammit, Grim! Do you plan these things? How long were you watching us?"

"So nice to see you as well, human." Grimalkin blinked at me, sarcastic, unruffled, and completely infuriating. He glanced at Ash, who'd gotten to his feet with barely a sound, and twitched an ear. "And it is good to know the rumors are entirely true."

Ash wore a blank expression, nonchalantly raking leaves from his hair, but I felt my face heat even more. "Why are you here, Grim?" I demanded. "I don't have any more debts you can collect on. Or did you just get bored?"

The cat yawned and licked a front paw. "Do not flatter yourself, human. Though it is always amusing to watch you flounder about, I am not here for my own entertainment." Grim scrubbed the paw over his face, then carefully cleaned the claws, one by one, before turning to me again. "When Leanansidhe heard why you were banished from the Nevernever, she could not believe it. I told her humans are unreasonable and irrational when it comes to their emotions, but to have the Winter prince exiled as well…she was sure it was a false rumor. Mab's son would never defy his queen and court, to be banished to the mortal world with the half-blood daughter of Oberon." Grimalkin snorted, sounding pleased with himself. "In fact, we made a rather interesting bet on it. She will be terribly annoyed when she hears she has lost."

I glanced at Ash, who was keeping his expression carefully neutral. Grimalkin sneezed, the feline equivalent of a laugh, and continued. "So,

naturally, when you disappeared from the Nevernever, Leanansidhe asked me to find you. She wishes to speak to you, human. Now."

My stomach contracted into a tiny knot, as Grimalkin stood and leaped gracefully from the wall, landing in the grass without a sound. "Follow me," he ordered, his eyes becoming floating golden orbs in the dark. "I will show you the trod to the Between from here. And human, there are rumors of Iron fey hunting you as well, so I suggest we hurry."

I swallowed. "No," I told him, and the orbs blinked in surprise. "I'm not done here. Leanansidhe wants to talk to me? Good, I have some things to talk to her about, as well. But I am not going into her mansion, knowing my dad is *right there*, and still having no idea who he is. I'm getting my memory back. Until then, she can just wait."

Ash touched the back of my arm, a silent, approving gesture, and Grimalkin stared at me as if I'd grown three heads. "Defying Leanansidhe. I had no idea it was going to be so interesting." He purred, narrowing his eyes. "Very well, human. I will accompany you, if only to see the Exile Queen's face when you tell her the reason she had to wait."

That sounded faintly ominous, but I didn't care. Leanansidhe had a lot to answer for, and I *would* get those answers—but first I needed to know what I was asking about.

* * *

THE MUSEUM DOORS WERE still unlocked as I eased my way inside, followed by Ash and a continuously purring Grimalkin, who disappeared as soon as he slipped through the door. He didn't creep away or hide in the shadows; he simply vanished from sight. It didn't surprise me in the least—I was used to it by now.

A withered figure waited for us near the back, leaning against a glass counter, turning a skull over in her hands. She bared her needlelike teeth in a smile as I approached, raking her nails along the skull's naked cheekbones.

"You have it," she whispered, her hollow gaze fastened on me. "I can smell it from here. Show it to me, human. What have you brought old Anna?"

I pulled the ring from my pocket and held it up, where it glimmered in the musty darkness like a firefly. The oracle's smile grew wider.

“Ah, yes. The doomed lovers, separated by age and time, and the hope that kept them alive. Futile though it was, in the end.” She coughed a laugh, a wisp of dust billowing from her mouth into the air. “Went to the graveyard, did you? How brazen. No wonder I kept seeing a dog in your future. You did not, by chance, get the mate of this ring, did you?”

“Um…no.”

“Ah, well.” She held out a withered hand, like a bird opening its talons. “I guess I shall have to be content with the one. Now, Meghan Chase, give me the Token.”

“You promised,” I reminded her, taking one step forward. “The Token for my memory. I want it all back.”

“Of course, child.” The oracle seemed annoyed. “I will relinquish the memory of your father—the memory you freely gave up, may I add—in exchange for the Token. As our bargain dictates, so shall it be done.” She flexed her claws impatiently. “Now, please. Hand it over.”

I hesitated a moment more, then dropped the ring into her palm.

Her fingers closed with such speed that I took a step back. The oracle sighed, holding the ring to her sunken chest. “Such longing,” she mused, as if in a daze. “Such emotion. I remember. Before I gave them all away. I remember how it felt to *feel*.” She sniffed, coming out of her trance, and floated back, behind the counter, her voice suddenly brittle and sour. “I don’t see how you mortals do it, these feelings you must endure. They will ruin you, in the end. Isn’t that right, prince?”

I started, but Ash didn’t seem surprised. “It’s worth it,” he said quietly.

“Yes, you tell yourself that now.” The oracle slipped the ring over a talon and held up her hand, admiring it. “But see how you feel a few decades from now, when the girl has grown withered and weak, slipping farther from you with each passing day, and you are as ageless as time. Or, perhaps—” she turned to me now “—your beloved prince will find the mortal realm is too much for him to stay, to *be*, and he will fade into nothingness. One day, you will wake up and he will simply be gone, only a memory, and you will never find love again, because how can a mere mortal compete with the fair folk?” The oracle hissed, lips curled into a sneer. “Then you will wish you were empty inside. Like me.”

Ash remained calm, expressionless, but I felt a stab of fear twist my stomach. “Is this…what you see?” I whispered, a band tightening around my heart. “Our future?”

“Flashes,” the oracle said, waving her hand dismissively. “The far-future is a constantly changing wave, always in motion, never certain. The story changes with every breath. Every decision we make sends it down another path. But…” She narrowed her hollow eyes at me. “There is one constant in your future, child, and that is pain. Pain and emptiness, for your friends, the ones you hold dearest to your heart, are nowhere to be seen.”

The band around my chest squeezed tight. The oracle smiled, a bitter, empty smile, and broke eye contact. “But perhaps you will change all that,” she mused, gesturing to something I couldn’t see behind the counter. “Perhaps you will find a happy ending to this tale, one that I have not seen. After all—” she held up a long finger, where the ring glimmered brightly against the gloom “—without hope, where would we be now?” She cackled and held out her hand.

A small glass globe floated up from behind the counter, hovering in the air before it came to rest in the oracle’s palm. Her nails curled over it, and she beckoned to me with her other hand.

“Here is what you seek,” she rasped, dropping the globe into my hand. I blinked in surprise. The glass felt as light and delicate as a bubble resting in my palm, as if I could crush it just by flexing my fingers. “When you are ready, simply shatter the globe, and your memory will be released.

“Now,” she continued, drawing back, “I believe that is everything you need, Meghan Chase. When I see you again, no matter what you choose, you will not be the same.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The oracle smiled. A breath of wind stirred the room, and she dissolved into a swirling cyclone of dust, sweeping through the air and stinging my eyes and throat. Coughing, I turned away, and when I was able to look up again, she was gone.

Trembling, I looked down at the globe in my hand. In the flickering faery light, I could see faint outlines in the reflective surface, images sliding across the glass. Reflections of things not there.

“Well?” came Grimalkin’s voice, as the cat appeared on another counter amid several jars containing dead snakes in amber liquid. “Are you going to smash it or not?”

“Are you sure it’ll come back to me?” I asked, watching a man’s face slide across the glass, followed by a girl on a bike. More images rippled

like mirages, too brief and distorted to recognize. “The oracle just told me they’d be released—she didn’t specifically say that they would come back. If I break this now, my memory won’t dissolve into thin air, or get soaked up by some hidden faery memory-soaker, will it?”

Grimalkin sneezed, echoing Ash’s quiet chuckle in the corner. “You’ve been around us too long,” Ash murmured, and I thought I heard a trace of sadness in his voice. I didn’t know if he meant I was being too suspicious, looking for loopholes in a faery bargain, or that he thought that was exactly what I should be doing.

Grimalkin snorted, giving me a disdainful look. “Not all fey seek to deceive you, human,” he said in a bored voice. “As far as I could tell, the oracle’s offer was genuine.” He sniffed and thumped his tail against the counter. “Had she wanted to entrap you, she would have wrapped so many riddles around the offer that you would never have a chance of untangling the true meaning.”

I looked at Ash, and he nodded. “Okay, then,” I said, taking a deep breath. I raised the globe above my head. “Here goes nothing.” And I flung it to the floor with all my might.

The fragile glass shattered against the carpet with an almost musical chime, shards spiraling up to become fragments of light that spun around the room. They merged and coalesced into a thousand images, fluttering through the air like frantic doves. As I watched, breathless, they swirled together and descended like a flock of birds in a horror movie. I was bombarded by an endless stream of images and emotions, all trying to rip into my head at once.

I put my hands to my face, trying to block them out, but it didn’t help. The visions kept coming, flitting through my head like a strobe light. Of a man with lank brown hair, long gentle fingers, and eyes that were always smiling. The images were all of him. Him…pushing me on the park swing. Holding my first bike steady as I wobbled down the sidewalk. Sitting at our old piano, his long fingers flying over the keys, as I sat on the couch and watched him play.

Walking into a tiny green pond, the water closing over his head, as I screamed and screamed until the police arrived.

When it was over, I was kneeling on the floor with Ash’s arms around me, holding me to his chest. I was panting, my hands clenched in his shirt,

and his body was rigid against mine. My head felt too full, throbbing like it was about to explode, ready to burst open at the seams.

But I remembered. Everything. I remembered the man who'd looked after me for six years. Who'd raised me, thinking I was his only daughter, not knowing my real heritage. Oberon had called him a stranger, but to hell with that. As far as I was concerned, Paul *was* my father in everything but blood. Oberon might be my biological dad, but he was never around. He was a stranger who had no interest in my life, who called me *daughter* but didn't know me at all. The man who'd read me bedtime stories in a singsong voice, put unicorn bandages on my scraped elbows, and held me on his knee while he played the piano—*he* was my real dad. And I'd always think of him as such.

"You okay?" Ash's cool breath tickled my cheek.

I nodded and pulled myself upright. My head still hurt, and there would be many long hours trying to sort out the torrent of images and emotions, but I finally knew what I had to do.

"All right, Grim," I said, looking up with a new resolve. "I have what I came for. *Now* I'm ready to see Leanansidhe."

But there was no answer. Grimalkin had disappeared.

CHAPTER FOUR
GLITCH'S RESISTANCE

"Grimalkin?" I called again, looking around the room. "Where are you?" Nothing. This was a bad sign. Grimalkin often disappeared when there was trouble, with no explanation and no warning for the rest of us. Of course, sometimes he disappeared just because he felt like it, so there was no telling what was going on, really.

"Meghan," Ash said, looking out the window with narrowed eyes, "I think you'd better see this."

A figure stood in the road outside the museum. Not human, I could tell that much. Though he wore ripped jeans and a studded leather jacket, the sharp, angular face and pointed ears gave him away. That, and his wild black hair, spiked up like a punk rocker, had neon threads of lightning flickering between the strands, reminding me of those plasma globes found in novelty stores. From his stance, it was obvious he was waiting for us.

"An Iron faery," Ash muttered, dropping his hand to his sword. "Do you want me to kill it?"

"No," I said, laying a hand on his arm. "He knows we're here. If he was going to attack us he would've done it by now. Let's see what he wants first."

"I would advise against that." Ash glowered at me, a hint of exasperation in his eyes. "Remember that the false king is still after you. You can't trust the Iron fey, especially now. Why would you want to speak with this one? The Iron Kingdom and everything in it are your enemies."

"Ironhorse wasn't."

Ash sighed and took his hand off the sword hilt. "As you wish," he murmured, bowing his head. "I don't like it, but let's see what the Iron faery wants. Though if he makes any threatening move at all, I will cut him down faster than he can blink."

We slipped out the doors into the humid night, crossing the road to where the Iron faery waited for us.

“Oh, good.” The Iron fey smiled as we walked up, a cocky, self-confident grin, much like a certain redhead I knew. “You didn’t run. I was afraid I’d have to chase you through the city streets before we could talk.”

I scowled at him. Up close, he looked younger, almost my age, though I knew that meant nothing. The fey were ageless. He could have been centuries old for all I knew. But despite that, and despite his obvious fey beauty, he looked like nothing more than a seventeen-year-old punk kid.

“Well,” I said, crossing my arms, “here I am. Who are you, and what do you want?”

“Brief and to the point. I like that.” The faery smirked. I didn’t return his smile, and he rolled his eyes, which were a shimmering violet, I noticed. “Fine, allow me to introduce myself, then. My name is Glitch.”

“Glitch.” I furrowed my brow, looking at Ash. “That sounds familiar. Where have I heard that name before?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard it before, Meghan Chase,” Glitch said, and the grin on his face stretched wider, showing teeth. “I was King Machina’s first lieutenant.”

Ash drew his sword in a flash of blue light, filling the air with cold. Glitch’s eyebrows shot up, but he didn’t move, even as the tip of the sword hovered inches from his chest. “You *could* hear me out instead of jumping to conclusions,” he offered.

“Ash,” I said softly, and Ash backed off a step, not sheathing his sword but not aiming it at Glitch’s heart anymore, either. “What do you want with me?” I asked, holding his gaze. “Do you serve the false king, now? Or did you just come by for introductions?”

“I’m here,” Glitch said, “because I want the false king stopped as much as you do. In case you haven’t heard, princess, the war with Iron isn’t going so well. Oberon and Mab have united to stop the false king, but their armies are slowly being crushed. The wyldwood grows smaller every day, as more and more territory is absorbed into the Iron Kingdom, expanding the false king’s realm. He needs only one more thing to be completely unstoppable.”

“Me,” I whispered. It wasn’t a question.

Glitch nodded. “He needs Machina’s power, and then his claim to the throne will be irrefutable. If he can kill you and take that power for himself, it will be over.”

“How does he know I have it? I’m not even sure, myself.”

“You killed Machina.” Glitch looked at me soberly, all cockiness gone. “The power of the Iron King passes to the one who defeats him. At least, that’s how I understand it. That’s why the false king’s claim to the throne is a sham. That’s why he wants you so badly.” He grinned then, evil and mischievous. “Thankfully, we’re making it a bit difficult for him, both in the war effort, and now with you.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

Glitch sobered. “Ironhorse was a friend of mine,” he murmured, and I felt a sharp pang at the mention of the noble faery. “He was the first to denounce the false king, and after him, more followed his example. We’re few in number, and we’ve been reduced to guerilla tactics against the false king’s army, but we do what we can.”

“You’re the resistance the spider-hags were talking about.”

“Spider-hags?” Glitch looked confused. “Ah, you must mean the king’s assassins. Yep, that’s us. Though like I said, we’re too small to really strike a blow against the false king. But we can do one very important thing that will keep him off the throne forever.”

“And what’s that?”

Glitch gave me an apologetic smile, and snapped his fingers.

Movement all around us, as dozens of Iron fey melted out of the shadows. I felt the cold pulse of Iron glamour, gray and flat and colorless, as they surrounded us in a bristly ring. I saw dwarves with mechanical arms and elves with huge black eyes, numbers scrolling across their pupils like glowing green ants. I saw dogs with bodies made of ticking clockwork, green-skinned fey with computer wires for hair, and many more. All of them had weapons—blades of iron, metal bats and chains, steely fangs or talons—all deadly to regular fey. Ash pressed close to me, his face grim, muscles coiled tight as he raised his sword. I spun and glared at Glitch.

“So, this is your plan?” I snapped, gesturing to the ring around us. “You want to kidnap me? That’s your answer to stopping the false king?”

“You have to understand, princess.” Glitch shrugged as he backed away from me, into the circle of fey. “This is for your own safety. We cannot allow you to fall into the false king’s hands, or he’ll win and everything will be lost. We have to keep you hidden, and safe. Nothing else matters now. Please, come quietly. You know there’s too many of us to fight. Even the Winter prince cannot defeat this many.”

“Really?” called a new voice, somewhere behind and above us all. “Well, if that’s the case, why don’t we level the field a bit?”

I whirled around, gazing up toward the rooftops, my heart leaping in my chest. Silhouetted against the moon, with his arms crossed and his red hair tousled by the wind, a familiar face grinned down at us, shaking his head.

“You,” Puck said, locking eyes with me, “are extremely difficult to track down, princess. Good thing Grimalkin came and found me. As usual, it looks like I have to rescue you and ice-boy from something. Again. This is starting to become a habit.”

Ash rolled his eyes, though his attention didn’t leave the fey surrounding us. “Stop yapping and get down here, Goodfellow.”

“Goodfellow?” Glitch stared at Puck nervously. “*Robin* Goodfellow?”

“Oh, look at that, he’s heard of me. My fame grows.” Puck snorted and leaped off the roof. In midair, he became a giant black raven, who swooped toward us with a raucous cry before dropping into the circle as Puck in an explosion of feathers. “Ta-daaaaaaaaaa.”

The rebels backed off a step, though Glitch held his ground. “There’s still only three of you,” he said firmly. “Not enough to fight us all. Princess, please, we only want to protect you. This doesn’t have to end in violence.”

“I don’t need your protection,” I said. “As you can see, I have more than enough.”

“Besides,” Puck said, grinning his evil grin, “who says I came alone?”

“You did,” called another Puck from the rooftop he just left. Glitch’s eyes bugged as the second Puck grinned down at him.

“No, he didn’t,” said a third Puck from the opposite roof.

“Well, I’m sure they know what he meant,” said yet another Puck, sitting atop a street lamp. “In any case, here we are.”

“This is a trick,” Glitch muttered, as the rebels shot nervous glances at the three Pucks, who waved back cheerfully. “Those aren’t real bodies. You’re screwing with our heads.”

Puck snickered. “Well, if that’s what you think, you’re welcome to try something.”

“It won’t end well for you, either way,” Ash broke in. “Even if you manage to beat us, we’ll make sure to decimate your little band of rebels before we fall. Count on it.”

“Get out of here, Glitch,” I said quietly. “We’re not going anywhere with you or your friends. I’m not going to hide from the false king and do nothing.”

“That,” Glitch said, narrowing his eyes, “is exactly what I’m afraid of.” But he turned and signaled his forces to back off, and the Iron fey melted into the shadows again. “We’ll be watching you, princess,” he warned, before he, too, turned and disappeared into the night.

Heart racing, I turned to see Puck staring at me, lopsided smirk firmly in place. Tall and gangly, he looked the same as always, eager for trouble, forever ready with a sarcastic quip or witty comeback. But I saw the flicker of pain in his eyes, a glint of anger he couldn’t quite conceal, and it made my gut clench. “Hey, princess.”

“Hey,” I whispered, as Ash slipped his arms around my waist from behind, drawing me close. I could feel his glare aimed at Puck over my head, a silent, protective gesture that spoke louder than any words. *Mine. Back off.* Puck ignored him, gazing solely at me. In the shadow of his gaze, I remembered our last meeting, and the ill-fated decision that brought us here.

* * *

“Meghan Chase!”

Oberon’s voice cracked like a whip, and a roar of thunder shook the ground. The Erlking’s voice was ominously quiet, eyes glowing amber through the gently falling snow. “The laws of our people are absolute,” Oberon warned. “Summer and Winter share many things, but love is not one of them. If you make this choice, daughter, the trods will never open for you again.”

“Meghan.” Puck stepped forward, pleading. “Don’t do this. I can’t follow you this time. Stay here. With me.”

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I’m sorry, Puck. I do love you, but I have to do this.” His face clouded with pain, and he turned away. Guilt stabbed at me, but in the end, the choice had always been clear.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again, and followed Ash through the portal, leaving Faery behind me forever.

* * *

THE MEMORY BURNED like bile in my stomach, and I closed my eyes, wishing it didn't have to be this way. I loved Puck like a brother and a best friend. And yet, during a very dark period when I was confused and lonely and hurt, my affection for him had led me to do something stupid, something I shouldn't have done. I knew he loved me, and the fact that I'd taken advantage of his feelings made me disgusted with myself. I wished I knew how to fix it, but the barely concealed pain in Puck's eyes told me no amount of words would make it better.

Finally, I found my voice. "What are you doing here?" I whispered, suddenly grateful for Ash's arms around me, a barrier between me and Puck. Puck shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" he replied, sounding a bit sharper than normal. "After you and ice-boy got yourselves exiled, I was worried that the Iron fey were still looking for you. So I came to find out. Good thing I did, too. So, who is this newest Iron fey you pissed off? Glitch, was it? Machina's first lieutenant—you sure know how to pick 'em, princess."

"Later." Grimalkin appeared from a shadow, bottlebrush tail waving in the wind. "Human, your attempted kidnapping has set off a riot among the New Orleans fey," he announced, his golden eyes boring into me. "We should get moving before anything else happens. The Iron fey are coming for you, and I have no wish to do this entire little rescue again. Talk when we get to Leanansidhe's. Let us go."

He trotted down the street with his tail held high, pausing once to peer at us from the edge of an alley, eyes glowing in the darkness, before slipping into the black.

I slid out of Ash's embrace and took a step toward Puck, hoping we could talk. I missed him. He was my best friend, and I wanted it to be like it was before, the three of us taking on the world. But as soon as I moved, Puck slid away, as if being near me was too uncomfortable to bear. In three long strides he reached the mouth of the alley, then turned to grin at us, red hair gleaming under the street lamps.

"Well, lovebirds? You coming or not? I can't wait to see the look on Lea's face when you both come strolling in." His eyes glinted, and his grin turned faintly savage. "You know, I heard she does horrid things to those who annoy her. Here's hoping she won't rip out your guts and use them for harp strings, prince." Snickering, he waggled his eyebrows at us and turned away, following Grimalkin into the shadows.

I sighed. “He hates me.”

Ash grunted. “No, I think that particular sentiment is reserved for me alone,” he said in an amused voice. When I didn’t answer, he motioned us forward, and we crossed the street together, coming to the mouth of the alley. “Goodfellow doesn’t hate you,” he continued as the shadows loomed dark and menacing beyond the street lamps. “He’s angry, but I think it’s more at himself. After all, he had sixteen years to make his move. It’s no one’s fault but his own that I beat him to it.”

“So it’s a competition now, huh?”

“If you want to call it that.” I had started to follow Puck and Grimalkin into the corridor, but he caught my waist and drew me close, sliding one hand up my back while the other framed my face. “I’ve already lost one girl to him,” Ash murmured, tangling his fingers in my hair. Though his voice was light, an old pain flickered across his face and vanished. “I won’t lose another.” His forehead bumped softly against mine, his brilliant silver gaze searing into me. “I plan to keep you, from everyone, for as long as I’m alive. That includes Puck, the false king, and anyone else who would take you away.” One corner of his mouth quirked, as I struggled to catch my breath under his powerful scrutiny. “I guess I should’ve warned you that I have a slight possessive streak.”

“I didn’t notice,” I whispered, trying to keep my voice light and sarcastic, but it came out rather breathy. “It’s all right—I’m not giving you up, either.”

His eyes turned very soft, and he lowered his head, brushing his lips to mine. I laced my hands behind his neck and closed my eyes, breathing in his scent, forgetting everything, if only for a moment.

“Oi, lovebirds!” Puck’s voice shattered the quiet, bouncing through the darkness. Ash pulled back with a rueful look. “Get a room, would ya? We’ve got better things to do than watch you suck face!”

“Indeed.” Grimalkin’s voice echoed Puck’s irritation, and I winced. Now even the cat was agreeing with Puck? “Hurry up, or we shall leave you behind.”

* * *

We followed Grimalkin through the city, down an unusually long, curving alleyway that turned pitch-black, and suddenly we were back in a familiar

dungeonlike basement with torches set into the walls and leering gargoyles curled around stone pillars.

Grimalkin set a brisk pace down several hallways, where torchlight flickered erratically and unseen things growled and scurried about in the darkness. I remembered the first time we came here, the first time we'd met Leanansidhe. Back then, there were more of us. Me, Puck, Grim, Ironhorse, and three half-breeds named Kimi, Nelson, and Warren.

We were a much smaller group now. Ironhorse was gone, as were Kimi and Nelson, all victims of Machina's cruel lieutenant Virus. Warren was a traitor, working for the false king. I wondered who else I would lose before this was over, if everyone around me was destined to die. I remembered the oracle's grim prophecy, about how I would end up all alone, and fought down my apprehension.

Ash's fingers curled around mine and squeezed. He didn't say anything, but I clung to his hand like a lifeline, as if he could vanish at any moment. We followed Grimalkin up a long flight of stairs to Leanansidhe's magnificent foyer, with the double grand staircases sweeping toward the roof, the walls covered with famous paintings and art. Instinctively, my eyes were drawn to the baby grand piano in the corner of the room. Where I'd first seen my father, sitting at that bench, hunched over the keys, and hadn't even known him.

The baby grand was empty, but the plush black sofa near the roaring fireplace was not. Reclining against the cushions, one slender hand gripping a sparkling wine flute, was Leanansidhe, Queen of the Exiles.

"Darlings!" Pale, tall, and beautiful, Leanansidhe smiled at us with lips as red as blood, bright copper hair rippling through the air as if it weighed nothing at all. She rose with liquid grace, her ebony gown swirling around her feet, and absently handed her wineglass to a waiting satyr, trading it for a cigarette flute. With the end trailing sapphire-blue smoke, she approached us with the grin of a hungry tiger.

"Meghan, my pet, how *good* of you to drop by. When you didn't return from the last mission, I thought the worst, darling. But I see you made it out, after all." Her cold blue gaze flicked to Ash, and she raised a slender eyebrow. "*And* with the Winter prince in tow. How—" she tapped her nails together, pursing her lips "—tenacious." Her gaze narrowed, and a ripple of power shivered through the air, making the lights flicker, as Leanansidhe turned on Ash. "The last I saw of you, your highness, you

were threatening to slaughter the girl's family. Be forewarned, darling, I don't care if you are Mab's favorite son. If you threaten any in *this* house, I will rip your guts out through your nose and string my harps with them."

"I'd love to see that, personally," Puck muttered, smirking. I shot him a furious glare, and he stuck out his tongue at me.

Ash bowed. "I've severed all ties to the Winter Court," he said evenly, facing the Exile Queen's glare. "I'm no longer 'your highness,' just an exile, like Meghan. And yourself. I mean no harm to you, or anyone within your house."

Leanansidhe gave him a tight smile. "Just remember who the queen is around here, darling." With a nod to the rest of my companions, she motioned us to the couches. "Sit, darlings, sit," she said in a voice that held an only thinly veiled threat. "I am afraid we have a lot to discuss."

I took a calming breath as I sank into the velvet cushions, feeling very small as the couch tried to swallow me whole. Ash chose to stand, looming behind me, while Puck and Grim perched on the arms. Leanansidhe sank gracefully into the opposite chair, crossing her long legs and staring at me over her cigarette. I thought of my dad, and anger burned, hot and furious. I had so much to ask her, so many questions, I didn't know where to start. Ash put a warning hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. No good would come of pissing off the Exile Queen, especially since she had the morbid habit of turning people into harps, cellos, or violins when they annoyed her. I had to proceed cautiously.

"So, darling." Leanansidhe took a drag off her cigarette and blew a smoke fish at me. "You've been banished from the Nevernever, in a most spectacular show of defiance, I've heard. What are you planning to do now?"

"Why do you care?" I asked her, trying to keep my emotions in check. "We returned the scepter and stopped the war between the courts. What do you care what we do now?"

Leanansidhe's eyes glittered, and her cigarette bobbed in annoyance. "Because, darling, there are disturbing rumors circulating the streets. Strange weather is plaguing the mortal world, Summer and Winter are losing ground to the Iron Realm, and there is a new faction of Iron fey that have popped up recently, looking for you. Also…" Leanansidhe leaned forward, narrowing her eyes "…there are stories about a half-breed princess who controls both Summer magic and Iron glamour. That she has

the power to rule both courts, and she is raising an army of her own—an army of exiles and Iron fey—to overthrow everything."

"What?"

"Those are the rumors, darling." Leanansidhe sat back and puffed out a swarm of butterflies. They flittered around me, smelling of smoke and cloves, before writhing into nothingness. "So, you can see why I would be concerned, pet. I wanted to see the truth for myself."

"But…that's…" I sputtered for words, feeling Ash's gaze on the back of my head, and Puck's curious stare. Only Grimalkin, washing his tail on the armrest, seemed unconcerned. "Of course I'm not raising an army," I burst out at last. "That's ridiculous. I have no intention of overthrowing anything!"

Leanansidhe gave me an unreadable look. "And the other claims, darling? About the princess using both Summer and Iron glamour? Are those fabricated, as well?"

I chewed my lip. "No. They're real."

She nodded slowly. "Like it or not, dove, you've become a major player in this war. You're balanced on the edge of everything—faery and mortal, Summer and Iron, the old ways and the march of progress. Which way will you fall? Which side will you choose? You'll forgive me if I'm not a little concerned with your affairs and state of mind, darling. What are your plans, exactly, for the future?"

"I don't know." I buried my face in my hands. I just wanted a normal life. I wanted to go home. I wanted… I sat up, looking her straight in the eye. "I want my father back. I want to know why you stole him from me eleven years ago."

Silence fell. I could feel the tension mount as Leanansidhe stared at me, her cigarette flute halfway to her mouth, trailing blue smoke. Ash gripped my shoulders, tense and ready to spring into action if needed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Grimalkin had disappeared, and Puck was frozen on the edge of the couch.

For a few heartbeats, nobody moved.

Then Leanansidhe threw back her head and laughed, making me jump. The lights flickered once, went out, and returned as the Queen of the Exiles swung her gaze down to me.

"Stole?" Leanansidhe sat back and crossed her long legs. "Stole? I'm quite certain you mean *saved,* don't you, pet?"

“I—” I blinked at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, so you haven’t heard this story. Puck, darling, shame on you. You never told her.”

I glanced sharply at Puck. He fidgeted on the armrest, not meeting my gaze, and I felt my stomach sink all the way down to my toes.

No, no. Not you, Puck. I’ve known you forever. Tell me you had nothing to do with this.

Leanansidhe laughed again. “Well, this is an unexpected drama. How fabulous! I must set the stage.” She clapped, and the lights abruptly went out, save for a single spotlight over the piano.

“Lea, don’t.” Puck’s voice surprised me, low, rough, and almost desperate. My stomach sank even lower. “Not this way. Let me explain it to her.”

Leanansidhe turned a remorseless gaze on Puck and shook her head. “No, darling. I think it’s time the girl knew the truth. You had plenty of time to tell her, so this is no fault but your own.” She waved her hand, and music started, dark, ominous piano chords, though no one sat at the bench. Another spotlight clicked on, this time over Leanansidhe as she rose in a billowing of cloth and hair. Standing tall, her hands raised as if embracing an audience, the Dark Muse closed her eyes and began to speak.

“Once upon a time, there were two mortals.”

Her musical voice shivered into my head, and I saw the images as clearly as if I was watching a movie. I saw my mom, younger, smiling, carefree, holding hands with a tall, lanky man whom I recognized now. Paul. My dad. They were talking and laughing, obviously in love and oblivious to the world. A lump rose in my throat.

“In mortal eyes,” Leanansidhe continued, “they were unremarkable. Two souls in a throng of identical humans. But to the faery world, they were fountains of glamour, beacons of light in the darkness. An artist whose paintings almost sang with a life of their own, and a musician whose soul was intertwined in his music, their love only heightened their talents.”

“Wait,” I blurted, interrupting the flow of the story. Leanansidhe blinked and dropped her hands, and the stream of images stumbled to a halt. “I think you have it wrong. My dad wasn’t a great musician, he was an insurance salesman. I mean, I know he played the piano, but if he was *so* good, why didn’t he do anything with it?”

“Who is telling the story here, pet?” The Exile Queen bristled, and the lights flickered again. “Don’t you know the term ‘starving artist’? Your father was very gifted, but music did not pay the bills. Now, do you want to hear this story or not, pet?”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, sinking back in the couch. “Go on, please.”

Leanansidhe sniffed, flipping back her hair, and the visions started again as she continued.

“They got married and, as humans do, began to drift apart. The man took a new job, one that required him to leave home for long periods of time; his music dwindled and soon ceased altogether. His wife continued to paint, less frequently than before, but now her art was filled with longing, a yearning for something more. And perhaps that was what drew the eye of the Summer King.”

I bit my lip. I’d heard this story before, from Oberon himself, but it still didn’t make it any easier. Ash squeezed my shoulder.

“Not long after, a child was born, a child of two worlds, half faery and half mortal. During that time, there was much speculation in the Summer Court, wondering if the child should be taken into Faery and raised as Oberon’s daughter, or if she was to stay in the human world with her mortal parents. Unfortunately, before a decision could be made, the family fled with the child, spiriting her far away and out of Oberon’s reach. To this day, no one knows how they accomplished this, though there was a rumor that the girl’s mother somehow found a way to hide them all, that perhaps she was not as blind to Faery as she first appeared.

“Ironically, it was the human’s music that gave them away again, when the father of the girl began composing again. Six years after they fled from the courts, Queen Titania discovered the location of the child’s family, and was determined to take her revenge. She could not kill the girl and risk Oberon’s wrath, nor did she dare strike at the mother, the human who caught the eye of the Summer King. But the girl’s mortal father had no such protection.”

“So, Titania took my dad?” I had to interrupt, though I knew it would probably piss Leanansidhe off again. She glowered at me, but I was too frustrated to care. “But, that doesn’t make sense! How’d he end up with you?”

Leanansidhe gave a dramatic sigh and picked up her cigarette holder, sucking on it with pursed lips. “I was just getting to the climax, darling,”

she sighed, blowing out a blue panther that bounded over my head. "You're probably a horror to take to the movies, aren't you?"

"No more stories," I said, standing up. "Please, just tell me. Did Titania steal my father or not?"

"No, darling." Leanansidhe rolled her eyes. "*I* stole your father."

I gaped at her. "You did! *Why?* Just so Titania couldn't?"

"Exactly, dove. I'm not particularly fond of the Summer bitch, pardon my French, since the jealous shrew was responsible for my exile. And you should be grateful it was I instead of Titania who took your father. He doesn't have a bad life, here. The Summer Queen probably would have turned him into a toad or rosebush or something similar."

"How did you even know about it? Why did you get involved?"

"Ask Puck," Leanansidhe said, waving her cigarette flute toward the end of the couch. "He was your appointed guardian at the time. He was the one who told me all about it."

I felt like someone punched me in the stomach. Incredulous, I turned to Puck, who was studiously studying the corner, and felt breathless. "Puck? *You* told her about my dad?"

He winced and looked at me, scrubbing the back of his head. "You don't understand, princess. When I got wind of Titania's plans, I had to do something. Oberon didn't care, he wouldn't have sent any help. Lea was the only one I could ask." He shrugged and offered a meek, apologetic grin. "I can't take on the Queen of the Seelie Court, princess. That would be suicide, even for me."

I took a deep breath to clear my thoughts, but my mood veered sharply to anger. Puck had known. He'd known all along where my dad was. All those years of being my best friend—of *pretending* to be my best friend—watching me struggle with the pain of losing a father, the nightmares that followed, the confusion and isolation and loneliness, and he'd known all along.

Rage flared, tinting my vision red, as eleven years of grief, confusion, and anger flooded in all at once. "Why didn't you tell me!" I burst out, making Puck flinch again. Clenching my fists, I stalked over to where he sat. Glamour flicked around me, hot and furious. "All that time, all those *years,* of knowing, and you never said anything! How could you? You were supposed to be my friend!"

“Princess—” Puck began, but fury overwhelmed me, and I slapped him across the face as hard as I could, knocking him off the armrest. He sprawled on the floor in shock, and I loomed over him, shaking with hate and tears. “You took my dad from me!” I screamed, fighting the urge to kick him in the ribs, repeatedly. “It was you all along!”

Ash grabbed me from behind, holding me back. I shook for a moment, then turned and buried my face in his chest, gasping for air as my tears stained his shirt.

So. Now I knew the truth, but took no pleasure from it. What do you say when your best friend has been lying to you for eleven years? I didn’t know how I could look at Puck again without wanting to punch him in the face. I did know this, however—the longer my dad remained here in the Between, the more he would forget the real world. I couldn’t let him stay with Leanansidhe. I had to get him out, today.

When I looked up again, Puck was gone, but Leanansidhe remained, watching me from the sofa with narrowed blue eyes. “So, darling,” she murmured as I stepped away from Ash, wiping my cheeks with my sleeve. “What will you do, now?”

I took a deep breath and faced Leanansidhe with the last of my remaining calm. “I want you to let my dad go,” I said, watching her arc one slender eyebrow. “He doesn’t belong here, with you. Let me take him back to the real world.”

Leanansidhe regarded me with a blank expression; no emotion showed in her eyes or face as she puffed her cigarette and blew a coiling viper into the air. “Darling, you know your mother will likely freak out if you show up one night with her long-lost husband. Do you think she will just take him back and things will go back to normal? It doesn’t work that way, dove. You will likely tear your little human family apart.”

“I know.” I swallowed a fresh batch of tears, but they still clogged my throat, making it hard to talk without crying. “I don’t plan to take him home. Mom…Mom has Luke and Ethan now. I know…we can’t be that family again, ever.” Tears spilled over as soon as I said the words out loud. It had been a fantasy, yes, but it still hurt to see it crushed, knowing the family I lost back then was gone forever.

“Then what do you want with him, dove?”

“I want him to be normal, just to have a normal life again!” I threw my hands up in frustrated despair. “I don’t want him to be crazy! I don’t want

him to wander around here forever, not knowing who he is or anything about his past. I…I want to talk to him, like a regular person, and see if he remembers me.” Ash moved closer and touched my back, just to reassure me he was still there. I glanced at him and smiled.

“I want him to move on,” I finished, looking Leanansidhe in the eyes. “And…he won’t be able to do that here, not aging, not remembering anything of who he is. You have to let him go.”

“Do I, now?” Leanansidhe smiled humorously, a dangerous edge to her voice. “And just how do you expect to convince me, darling? I’m rather loathe to give up any of my pets, relative of yours or not. So, my dove, what do you have to offer for your father’s freedom?”

I steeled myself. Now came the most dangerous part, the bargaining. I could only imagine what the Dark Muse might want from me—my voice, my youth, my firstborn child were all things she could ask for. But before I could say a word, Ash took my elbow and pressed something into my palm.

Curious, I held up my hand. A small gold ring flickered in my palm, surrounded by a gently swirling aura of blue and green. It looked exactly like the one we’d taken from the tomb. I glanced at Ash sharply, and he winked at me.

“Remember when the oracle asked if you had the ring’s mate?” he whispered, his breath tickling my ear. “At least one of us was thinking ahead.”

“Well, darling?” Leanansidhe called before I could reply. “What are you two whispering about? Does it have anything to do with what you’re going to trade for your father?”

I gave Ash a brilliant smile and turned to Leanansidhe again. “Yes,” I murmured, and raised the Token so that it gleamed under the lights. Leanansidhe sat straight up in her chair. “I can give you this.”

The brief, eager flash in the queen’s eyes told me we had won. “A Token, darling?” Leanansidhe leaned back again, feigning nonchalance. “That might be sufficient. For now, anyway. I suppose I can trade your father for that.”

I was weak with relief, but Ash stepped forward, closing his hand over the ring and my fingers. “That’s not enough,” he said, and I gaped at him in disbelief. “You know the Iron fey are looking for Meghan. We can’t just

wander around the mortal world without a plan. We need a place that will be secure from the false king's minions."

"Ash, what are you doing?" I hissed under my breath. He gave me a sideways glance and mouthed, "Trust me."

Leanansidhe pursed her lips. "You two are pressing the boundaries of my patience." She drummed her nails on the armrest and sighed. "Oh, very well, darlings. I have a quaint little hideaway that I can lend you for the time being. It's out in the middle of nowhere and fairly safe—I've got a few of the local trows keeping an eye on it. Will that be *good enough* for you, dove?"

I looked at Ash, and he nodded. "All right," I told Leanansidhe, putting the Token on an end table, where it glimmered like a stray firefly. "You have a deal. Now, where's my dad?"

Leanansidhe smiled. Rising gracefully, she floated over to the baby grand in the corner and sat at the bench, running her fingers over the keys.

"Right here, darling. After you left, I'm afraid your father became inconsolable. He kept trying to leave the manor, so I'm afraid I had to put an end to those silly notions of escape."

CHAPTER FIVE
THE HIDDEN SANCTUARY

"Change him back!" I cried, horror pinning my feet to the carpet.

"Oh, don't fret, darling." Leanansidhe stroked a nail over the keys, releasing a mournful, shivery note. "It's not permanent. However, you will have to take him out of the Between to change him back. The spell dictates that as long as he stays here, he remains as he is. But look at it this way, darling—at least I didn't turn him into a pipe organ.

"Now," she said, rising with a catlike stretch, oblivious to my horrified stare, "I simply insist you join me for dinner, darlings. Cook is making hippocampus soup tonight, and I'm dying to hear how you got the scepter back from Virus. And of course, your little declaration in front of Mab and Oberon and the entirety of the courts." She wrinkled her nose in an almost affectionate manner. "Ah, young love. It must be wonderful to be so naive."

"What about my dad?"

"Pish, darling. He's not going anywhere." Leanansidhe waved her hand airily. If she saw me bristle, she didn't comment on it. Ash put a hand on my arm before I could explode. "Now, come with me, dove. Dinner first, maybe a little gossip, and then you can run off if you like. I believe Puck and Grimalkin are already in the dining hall."

Anger flared again at the mention of Puck. *Bastard,* I thought, following Leanansidhe down her many red-carpeted hallways, only half listening to her chatter. *I'll never forgive him. Never. Not telling me about my dad was unforgivable. He's gone too far this time.*

Puck wasn't in the dining room with Grimalkin when we came in, which was a good thing because I would've spent the whole evening shooting him poisonous glares over my bowl. Instead, I ate an extremely fishy soup that turned everything weird swirly colors with every swallow, answered Leanansidhe's questions as to what happened with Virus and the scepter, and eventually came to the part where Ash and I were banished from the Nevernever.

“And what happened then, dove?” Leanansidhe prodded when I told her how I’d given the scepter back to Mab.

“Um…” I hesitated, embarrassed, and snuck a peek at Ash. He sat in his chair, fingers laced under his chin, pretending no interest in the conversation. “Didn’t Grimalkin tell you?”

“He did, darling, but I’d much prefer to hear it firsthand. I’m about to lose a very costly wager, you see, so I’d love it if you could give me a loophole.” She scowled at Grimalkin, who sat on the table, washing his paws in a very smug manner. “He’ll be simply insufferable after this, I’m afraid. Details, darling, I need details.”

“Well…”

“Mistress!”

Fortunately, I was saved a reply by the noisy arrival of Razor Dan and his redcaps. Still dressed in matching butler suits with pink bow ties, the redcaps filed into the dining room, every one of them scowling at me. Ash’s eyes widened, and he quickly hid his mouth under his laced fingers, but I saw his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Luckily, the redcaps didn’t notice. “We delivered the piano to the cabin, like you ordered,” Razor Dan growled, the fishhook in his nose quivering indignantly. “And we stocked it with supplies, like you asked. It’s all ready for the brat and her pets.” He glared at me and bared his fangs, as if remembering our last little encounter. He had been in cahoots with Warren, the bitter half satyr who’d tried to kidnap me and take me to the false king the last time I was here. Leanansidhe had punished Warren (I wasn’t sure how, and I didn’t want to know) but spared the redcaps, saying they were only following their base instincts. Or maybe she just didn’t want to lose her free slave labor. In any case, they’d just provided me with a much-needed distraction.

I leaped from my chair, drawing surprised looks from everyone in the room. “We really should go,” I said, not needing to feign my impatience. “My dad is there, right? I don’t want him to be alone when he turns back from being a piano.”

Leanansidhe snorted with amusement, and I realized how odd that sentence sounded, even to me. “Don’t worry, dove. It will take time for the glamour to wear off. But I understand if you have to go. Just remember, my door is always open if you want to come back.” She waved her

cigarette at Grimalkin, sitting on the other side of the table. “Grim, darling, you know the way, right?”

Grimalkin yawned widely and stretched. Curling his tail around himself, he regarded the Exile Queen without blinking and twitched an ear. “I believe you and I still have a wager to settle,” he purred. “One that you lost, if you remember.”

“You are a horrid creature, Grimalkin.” Leanansidhe sighed and puffed a smoke-cat into the air, then sent a smoke-hound after it. “It seems I am destined to lose bargains today. Very well, cat, you can have your bloody favor. And may you choke on it when you try to call it in.”

Grimalkin purred and seemed to smile. “This way,” he told me, waving his tail as he stood. “We will have to go back through the cellar, but the trod is not far. Just be wary when we get there—Leanansidhe failed to mention that this particular spot is infested with bogles.”

“What about Goodfellow?” Ash said, before I could ask what a bogle was. “Should he know where we’re going, or are we going to leave him behind?”

My stomach turned, angry and sullen. “I don’t care,” I growled, and scanned the dining room, wondering if one of the chairs, plates, or utensils was actually Puck in disguise. “He can follow us or not, but he’d better stay out of my way if he knows what’s good for him. I don’t want to see his face for a long time. Come on, Grim.” I looked at the cat, watching us with an amused, half-lidded expression, and raised my chin. “Let’s get out of here.”

* * *

BACK THROUGH THE BASEMENT we went, Grimalkin in the lead, down another maze of torchlit hallways to an old wooden door hanging crookedly from its hinges. Sunlight streamed in through the cracks, and birdsong trilled somewhere beyond the door.

I pulled it open and found myself in a dense forest glen, broad-leafed trees surrounding us on every side and a babbling stream cutting through the clearing. Sunlight dappled the forest floor, and a pair of spotted deer raised their heads to watch us, curious and unafraid.

Ash stepped through the stony mound we’d exited, and the door creaked shut behind him. He took in the forest surroundings with one

smooth, practiced gaze, and turned to Grimalkin.

"There are several trows watching us from the bushes. Are they going to be a problem?"

Startled, I scanned the clearing, searching for the elusive trows, which, from what I understood, were squat, ugly fey who lived underground, but apart from the deer, we appeared to be alone. Grimalkin yawned and scratched behind an ear.

"Leanansidhe's groundskeepers," he said offhandedly. "Nothing to worry about. If you hear feet moving around the cabin at night, it is probably them. Or the brownies."

"What cabin?" I asked, gazing around the clearing. "I don't see a cabin."

"Of course not. This way, human." Tail up, Grimalkin trotted across the clearing, hopped the stream, and disappeared midjump.

I sighed. "Why does he always do that?"

"I don't think it was on purpose this time," Ash said, and took my hand. "Come on."

We crossed the glen, passing very close to the deer, who still didn't run away, and hopped over the little stream.

As soon as my feet left the ground, I felt a tingle of magic, like I was jumping through an invisible barrier. When I landed, I was no longer staring at empty forest but an enormous, two-story lodge with a veranda that circled the entire upper deck and smoke writhing from the chimney. The front of it stood on stilts, a good twenty-something feet off the ground, and gave the front deck a fantastic view of the whole clearing.

I gaped. "This is her 'quaint little hideaway'? I was thinking more along the lines of a one-room cabin with an out-house or something."

"That's Leanansidhe," Ash said, sounding amused. "She could have glamoured the outside to look like a rundown cabin instead of hiding the whole thing, but I don't think that's her style." He gazed up at the looming structure and frowned. "I hear music."

My heart jumped. "Piano music? My dad!"

We raced up the steps, taking them two at a time, and burst into the living room, where a cheerful fire crackled in the hearth and the dark strains of piano music pounded from the corner.

My dad sat at the piano bench, his lank brown hair falling into his eyes, his skinny shoulders hunched over the keys. Slouched a few feet

away, with his shoes on the coffee table and his hands behind his head, was Puck.

Puck caught my gaze and smirked, but I ignored him as I rushed to the piano bench. “Dad!” I had to shout to be heard over the music. “Dad! Do you recognize me? It’s Meghan. Meghan, your daughter. Do you remember?”

He hunched even farther over the keys, pounding on them like his life depended on it. I grabbed his arm and yanked him around, forcing him to look at me. “Dad!”

His hazel eyes, empty as the sky, stared right through me, and I felt an icy spear plunge into my stomach. I let him go, and he immediately went back to playing the piano, pounding the keys as I staggered back and sank into a nearby chair.

“What’s wrong with him?” I whispered.

Grimalkin leaped up beside me. “Remember, human, he has been in Faery for a very long time. Also, until just recently, he was a musical instrument, which was probably fairly traumatic. It is to be expected that his mind is a little fractured. Give him time, and he should come out of it eventually.”

“Should?” I choked, but the cat had moved on to washing his back toes and did not reply.

I hid my face in my hands, then pulled them back and glared at Puck. “What are you doing here?” I asked stonily.

“Me?” Puck leered at me, smug and looking not the least bit sorry. “I’m on vacation, princess.”

“Go away,” I told him, rising from my seat. “Go back to Oberon and leave us alone. You’ve done enough damage.”

“He cannot go back to Oberon,” Grimalkin said, leaping to the back of the couch. “Oberon exiled him when he came after you. He disobeyed the king’s orders and has been banished from the Nevernever.”

Guilt now joined the swirl of angry emotions, and I stared at Puck in disbelief. “That was stupid,” I told him. “Why would you get yourself banished like that? Now you’re stuck here with the rest of us.”

Puck’s eyes gleamed, feral and menacing. “Oh, I don’t know, princess. Maybe it was because I was stupid enough to care about you. Maybe I actually thought I had a chance. Silly me, thinking that one little kiss meant anything to you.”

“You kissed him?” Ash sounded like he was trying to hide his shock. I cringed. Things were rapidly spinning out of control. My father seemed to pick up on the tension, and banged harder on the keys.

I stared at Puck, torn between anger and guilt. “We’re not talking about that right now,” I began, but he overrode me.

“Oh, I think we should,” Puck interrupted, crossing his arms. I started to protest, but he raised his voice. “So, tell me, princess, when you said you loved me, was that a lie?”

Ash went rigid; I could feel his eyes on me, and cursed Puck for bringing this up now. Puck was watching me too, lips curled in a smirk, enjoying my reaction. I wanted to hit him and apologize at the same time, but anger was stronger.

I took a breath. Fine. If Puck wanted to force the issue now, I’d tell him the truth. “No,” I said, raising my voice to be heard over the piano chords. “I didn’t lie to you, Puck. I meant what I said—at least, I did back then. But it’s not the same as what I feel for Ash, you knew that.”

“Did I?” Puck’s voice was ugly. “Maybe I did, but you sure led me on a merry chase, princess. Just like a pro. When were you going to tell me I didn’t have a cold chance in hell?”

“I don’t know!” I snapped, taking a step forward and clenching my fists. “When were you going to tell me about my father, Puck? When were you going to tell me you knew where he was all along?”

Puck fell silent, watching me with a sullen expression. The clanging of the piano filled the room, frantic and chaotic. In the corner, Ash was motionless; he could’ve been made of stone.

Rising from the couch, Puck swept a cruel gaze at us all and broke into a sneer.

“You know, I think I will get out of here,” he drawled. “It’s gotten crowded of late, and I was just thinking I needed a vacation.” Glancing at Ash, he smirked and shook his head. “Not enough room in this cabin for both of us, ice-boy. You ever want that duel, you can find me in the woods. And if either one of you comes up with an actual plan, do me a favor and leave me out of it. I’m outta here.”

With a last sneer, Puck walked across the room and out the door without looking back.

Guilt and anger flared, but I turned back to my dad, whose frantic banging on the piano keys had calmed somewhat. I had other things to

worry about besides Puck. “Dad,” I said quietly, slipping beside him. “You need to stop now. Just for a little while, okay? Will you stop?” I pried his hands away from the keys, and this time he let me, dropping them to his lap. So he wasn’t completely unreachable, that was good. He still didn’t look at me, though, and I studied the lean, haggard face, the lines around his eyes and mouth even though he was a fairly young man, and felt close to despair.

Ash appeared beside me, close but not quite touching. “The master bedroom is down the hall,” he said quietly. “I think your father will be comfortable there, if you can get him to follow you.”

In a daze, I nodded. Somehow, we got my dad on his feet and led him down the hall to the large bedroom at the end. Leanansidhe’s master bedroom didn’t lack anything in luxury, from the four-poster bed to the bubbling natural hot spring in the bathroom, but it still felt like a jail cell as I ushered my dad inside and shut the door behind him.

Leaning against the door, I shook with exhausted tears, feeling stretched in several directions at once. Ash hovered nearby, just watching. He looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to pull me close, but there was a barrier between us now, the admission with Puck hanging in the air like barbed wire.

“Come on,” Ash murmured, finally brushing my arm. “There’s nothing you can do for him now. You’re exhausted, and you can’t help anyone like this. Get some rest.”

Feeling numb, I let him lead me away, down the hall and up a flight of stairs to the loft overlooking the main room. A rustic log railing barred the edge, where you could peer down on the living room below, and a queen-size bed with a grizzly-bear rug complete with head and claws crouched under the eaves.

Ash dragged the awful bear rug off the bed and motioned for me to get in. In a daze, I settled on top of the covers. Without the piano chords, the cabin seemed unnaturally quiet, the silence thudding in my ears. Ash loomed over me, strangely formal and unsure. “I’ll be downstairs,” he murmured. “Try to get some sleep.” He started to pull away, but I reached up and grabbed his hand, holding it tight.

“Ash, wait,” I said, and he went perfectly still. It might’ve been too soon, reaching out for him, but I was drowning in an overload of emotion: anger at Puck, worry for my dad, fear that I’d just sabotaged my

relationship with Ash. “I can’t be alone right now,” I whispered, clinging to his hand. “Please, just stay with me for a little while. You don’t have to say anything, we don’t have to talk. Just…stay. Please.”

He hesitated. I saw the indecision in his eyes, the silent battle, before he finally nodded. Sliding onto the bed, he leaned back against the headboard and I curled up beside him, content just to feel him near me. I heard his heartbeat, despite the rigid way he held himself, and caught a glimmer of emotion surrounding him like a hazy aura, a reaction he wasn’t able to hide.

I blinked. “You’re…jealous,” I said in disbelief. Ash, former prince of the Unseelie Court, was jealous. Of Puck. I didn’t know why I found that so surprising; maybe Ash seemed too calm and self-assured to be jealous. But there was no mistaking what I saw.

Ash shifted uncomfortably and gave me a look from the corner of his eye. “Is that so wrong?” he asked softly, turning to stare at the far wall. “Is it so wrong to be jealous, when I heard that you kissed him, when you told him…” He trailed off, raking a hand through his hair, and I bit my lip. “I know I was the one who left,” he continued, still staring at the wall. “I said we were enemies and that we couldn’t be together. I knew it would break your heart, but…I also knew Puck would be there to pick up the pieces. Whatever came of that, I brought on myself. I know I have no right to ask…” He stopped, taking a short breath, as if that confession had been difficult. I held my breath, knowing there was more.

“But,” he went on, finally turning to me, “I have to know, Meghan. I can’t wonder about this, not with him. Or you. It will drive me crazy.” He sighed and suddenly took my hand, staring at our tangled fingers. “You know what I feel for you. You know I’ll protect you from whatever comes at us, but this is the one thing I can’t fight.”

“Ash—”

“If you’re torn about whether you want to be with Goodfellow, tell me now. I’ll step down, give you space, whatever you want me to do.” Ash trembled, just a little, as he said this. I felt his heart speed up as he turned to meet my gaze, his silver eyes intense. “Just answer me this today, and I’ll never ask you again. Do you love him?”

I took a breath, ready to deny it immediately, but stopped. I couldn’t give him a short, flippant answer, not when he was looking at me like that. He deserved to know the truth. All of it.

“I did,” I said softly. “At least, I thought I did. I’m not so sure now.” I paused, choosing my words carefully. Ash waited, his whole body tense like a coiled wire, as I gathered my thoughts. “When you left,” I went on, “I was hurt. I thought I wouldn’t see you again. You told me we were enemies, that we couldn’t be together, and I believed you. I was angry and confused, and Puck was there to pick up the pieces, like you said. It was easy to turn to Puck because I knew how he felt. And, for a little while, I thought I might…love him, too.

“But,” I continued, as my voice started to shake, “when I saw you again, I realized what I felt for Puck wasn’t the same. He was my best friend, and I’d always have a spot for him in my heart, but…it was you, Ash. I didn’t really have a choice. It’s always been you.”

Ash didn’t say anything, but I heard his faint sigh, as if he’d been holding his breath, and he drew me close, wrapping his arms around me. I lay my head on his chest and closed my eyes, shoving thoughts of Puck and my dad and the false king to the back of my mind. I would deal with them tomorrow. Right now, I just wanted to sleep, to sink into oblivion and forget everything for a little while. Ash was still quiet, thoughtful. His glamour aura glimmered once, then flickered out of sight again. But all I had to do was listen to his heart, thudding in his chest, to know what he was feeling.

“Talk to me,” I whispered, tracing his ribs through his shirt, making him shiver. “Please. The silence is driving me crazy. I don’t want to hear myself think right now.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. Tell me a story. Tell me about the places you’ve been. Anything to keep my mind off…everything.”

Ash paused. After a moment, he started humming a soft, slow melody, drowning out the silence. It was a haunting, peaceful tune, reminding me of falling snow and hibernating trees and animals huddled in their dens, sleeping the winter away. I felt his hand running the length of my back, a gentle rhythm in time with the lullaby, and sleep crept over me like a warm blanket.

“Ash?” I whispered, as my eyelids began to drift shut.

“Yes?”

“Don’t leave me, all right?

“I already promised that I would stay.” He stroked my hair, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “For as long as you want me.”

“Ash?”

“Mmm?”

“…I love you.”

His hands stilled; I felt them tremble. “I know,” he murmured, bending his head close to mine. “Get some sleep. I’ll be right here.”

His deep voice was the last thing I heard before I drifted into the void.

* * *

“Hello, my love,” Machina whispered, holding out his hands as I approached, steel cables writhing behind him in a hypnotic dance. Tall and elegant, his long silver hair rippling like liquid mercury, he watched me with eyes as black as night. “I have been waiting for you.”

“Machina.” I shivered, gazing around the empty void, hearing my voice echo all around us. We were alone in the fathomless dark. “Where am I? Why are you here? I thought I killed you.”

The Iron King smiled, silver hair glowing in the utter darkness. “You can never be rid of me, Meghan Chase. We are one, now and forever. You just have not accepted that yet. Come.” He beckoned me forward. “Come to me, my love, and let me show you what I mean.”

I backed away. “Stop calling me that. I’m not yours.” He drifted closer, and I took another step back. “And you’re not supposed to be here. Stop lurking around my dreams. I already have someone, and it’s not you.”

Machina’s smile didn’t falter. “Ah, yes. Your Unseelie prince. Do you really think you’ll be able to keep him once you realize who you really are? Do you think he will even want you anymore?”

“What do you know about that? You’re just a dream—a nightmare, really.”

“No, my love.” Machina shook his head. “I am the part of you that you cannot bring yourself to accept. And as long as you keep denying me, you will never understand your true potential. Without me, you will never be enough to defeat the false king.”

“I’ll take my chances.” Narrowing my eyes, I stabbed a finger at him. “And now, I think it’s time you went away. This is *my* dream, and you’re not welcome here. Get out.”

Machina shook his head sadly. “Very well, Meghan Chase. If you decide you need me after all—and you will—I will be right here.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I mumbled, and my own voice woke me up.

* * *

I BLINKED AND RAISED my head from the pillow. The room was dark, but outside the round loft window, gray light filtered in from a brightening sky. Ash was gone and the space beside me was cold. He’d left sometime during the night.

The scent of bacon drifted up from below, and my stomach grumbled a response. I headed downstairs, wondering who was cooking at such an early hour. The image of Ash flipping pancakes in a white apron came to mind, and I giggled hysterically as I entered the kitchen.

Ash wasn’t there, and neither was Puck, but Grimalkin looked up from a table laden with food. Eggs, pancakes, bacon, biscuits, fruit, and oatmeal covered every surface of the tabletop, along with whole pitchers of milk and orange juice. Grimalkin, sitting on the corner, blinked at me once, then went back to dunking his paw in a glass of milk and licking it off.

“What is all this?” I asked, amazed. “Did Dad cook? Or… Ash?”

Grimalkin snorted. “Those two? I shudder to think of the consequences. No, Leanansidhe’s brownies took care of this, just like they have cleaned your room and made your bed by now.” He observed the opaque white droplets on his paw and flicked them off rapidly.

“Where is everyone?”

“The human is still asleep. Goodfellow has not returned, though I am sure he will sometime in the future, probably with the ire of all the local fey on his heels.”

“I don’t care what Puck does. He can get eaten by trolls for all I care.” Grimalkin seemed unfazed by my hostility and calmly licked a paw. I picked at the scrambled eggs sitting before me. “Where’s Ash?”

“The Winter prince left yesterday evening while you were asleep and said nothing about where he was going, of course. He returned a few minutes ago.”

“He left? Where is he now?”

A thump from the door drew our attention. Paul wandered into the kitchen, shuffling like a zombie, his hair in disarray. He didn’t look at

either of us.

"Hey," I greeted softly, but I might as well have saved my breath. Paul acted like he didn't hear me. Staring at the laden breakfast table, he picked up a piece of toast, nibbled a corner, and wandered back out, all without acknowledging my existence.

My appetite fled. Grimalkin eyed the glass of milk perched on the corner and tapped it experimentally. "By the way," he continued as I stared moodily out the door, "your Winter prince wishes you to meet him in the clearing beyond the stream after you have eaten. He implied that it was important."

I grabbed a bacon slice and nibbled half-heartedly. "Ash did? Why?"

"I did not care enough to ask."

"What about my dad?" I glanced in the direction Paul had gone. "Will he be safe? Should I just leave him alone?"

"You are terribly dull this morning." Grimalkin deliberately knocked over the glass of milk and watched it drip to the floor in satisfaction. "The same glamour that keeps mortals out of this place also keeps them in. Should the human go wandering around outside, he will not be able to leave the clearing. No matter the direction he takes, he will only find himself back where he started."

"What if I want to take him away? He can't stay here forever."

"Then you had better take that up with Leanansidhe, not I. In any case, it is no concern of mine." Grimalkin dropped from the table, landing on the wooden floor with a thump. "When you go to meet the prince, leave the dishes as they are," he said, arching his tail over his back. "If you wash them, the brownies will be insulted and might leave the cabin, and that would be terribly inconvenient."

"Is that why you made a mess?" I asked, eying the milk dripping to the floor. "So the brownies would have something to clean up?"

"Of course not, human." Grimalkin yawned. "That was purely for the fun of it." And he trotted from the room, leaving me to shake my head, grab a piece of toast, and hurry outside.

CHAPTER SIX
LESSONS

It was a foggy gray morning, with mist curling along the ground in wispy threads, muffling my footsteps. I hopped over the brook and looked back once I reached the other side. The cabin had disappeared once more, showing only misty forest beyond the stream.

In the center of the clearing, a dark silhouette danced and spun in the mist, his long coat billowing out behind him, an icy sword cutting through the fog like paper. I leaned against a tree and watched, hypnotized by the graceful, whirling movements, the deadly speed and accuracy of the sword strikes, far too quick for a human to ever keep up with. Uneasiness gnawed at me as I suddenly remembered the dream, Machina's soft voice echoing in my head. *Do you think you'll be able to keep him, once you discover who you really are? Do you think he will even want you anymore?*

Angrily, I pushed those thoughts away. What did he know? Besides, that was just a dream, a nightmare conjured from stress and the worry over my dad. It didn't mean anything.

Ash finished the drill and with a final flourish, slammed the blade into its sheath. For a moment, he stood motionless, breathing deeply, the mist curling around him. "Is your father any better?" he asked without turning around. I jumped.

"Hasn't changed." I moved across the damp grass toward him, soaking the hems of my jeans. "How long have you been out here?"

He turned, raking a hand through his bangs, shoving them out of his eyes. "I went back to Leanansidhe's last night," he said, walking forward. "I wanted to get something for you, so I had one of her contacts track one down for me."

"Track…what down?"

Ash strode to a nearby rock, swooped down, and tossed me a long, slightly curved stick. When I caught it, I saw that it was actually a leather sheath with a gilded brass hilt poking from the top. A sword. Ash was giving me a sword…why?

Oh, yeah. Because I wanted to learn to fight. Because I'd asked him to teach me.

Ash, watching me with that weary, knowing look on his face, shook his head. "You forgot, did you?"

"Nooooo," I said quickly. "I just…didn't think it would be this soon."

"This is the perfect place." Ash turned slightly to gaze around the clearing. "Quiet, hidden. We can catch our breath here. It's a good place to learn while you're waiting for your father to come out of it. When we're done here, I have a feeling things will get much more chaotic." He gestured to the sword in my hand. "Your first lesson begins now. Draw your sword."

I did. Unsheathing it sent a raspy shiver across the glen, and I gazed at the weapon in fascination. The blade was thin and slightly curved, an elegant-looking weapon, razor sharp and deadly. A warning tickled the back of my mind. There was something about the blade that was… different. Blinking, I ran my fingers along the cool, gleaming edge, and a chill shot through my stomach.

The blade was made of steel. Not faery steel. Not a fey sword covered in glamour. Real, ordinary iron. The kind that would burn faery flesh and sear away glamour. The kind that left wounds impossible to heal.

I gaped at it, then at Ash, who looked remarkably calm to be facing his greatest weakness. "This is steel," I told him, sure that Leanansidhe had made a mistake.

He nodded. "An eighteenth-century Spanish saber. Leanansidhe nearly had a fit when I told her what I wanted, but she was able to track one down in exchange for a favor." He paused then, wincing slightly. "A very large favor."

Alarmed, I stared at him. "What did you promise her?"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing that endangers us in any way." He hurried on before I could argue. "I wanted a light, slashing weapon for you, one with a good amount of reach, to keep opponents farther away." He gestured to the saber with his own weapon, a blindingly quick stab of blue. "You'll be moving around a lot, using speed instead of brute force against your enemies. That blade won't block heavier weapons, and you don't have the strength to swing a longsword effectively, so we're going to have to teach you how to dodge. This was the best choice."

“But this is steel,” I repeated, listening to him in amazement. He could teach a class with his knowledge of weapons and fighting. “Why a real sword? I could seriously hurt someone.”

“Meghan.” Ash gave me a patient look. “That’s exactly why I chose it. You have an advantage with that weapon that none of us can touch. Even the most violent redcap will think twice about facing a real, mortal blade. It won’t scare the Iron fey, of course, but that’s where training will come in.”

“But…but what if I hit you?”

A snort. “You’re not going to hit me.”

“How do you know?” I bristled at his amused tone. “I could hit you. Even master swordsmen make mistakes. I could get a lucky shot, or you might not see me coming. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He favored me with another patient look. “And how much experience do you have with swords and weapons in general?”

“Um.” I glanced down at the saber in my hand. “Thirty seconds?”

He smiled, that calm, irritatingly confident smirk. “You’re not going to hit me.”

I scowled. Ash chuckled, then raised his weapon and stalked forward, all amusement gone. “Although,” he continued, sliding into predator mode with no effort at all, “I do want you to try.”

I gulped and backed away. “Now? Don’t I get a warm-up or something? I don’t even know how to hold the thing properly.”

“Holding it is easy.” Ash slid closer, circling me like a wolf. One finger pointed to the tip of his blade. “The sharp end goes in first.”

“That’s so not helpful, Ash.”

He smiled grimly and continued to stalk. “Meghan, I would love to teach you properly, from the beginning, but that takes years, centuries, even. And since we don’t have that kind of time, I’m giving you the condensed version. Besides, the best way to learn is by doing.” He jabbed at me with his sword, nowhere near coming close, but I jumped anyway. “Now, try to hit me. And don’t hold back.”

I didn’t want to, but I had asked him to teach me, after all. Bunching my muscles, I gave a feeble yell and lunged, stabbing at him with the tip.

Ash slid aside. In the space of a blink, his sword licked out, slapping my ribs with the flat of the blade. I shrieked as I felt the bite of absolute cold through my shirt, and glared at him.

“Dammit, Ash, that hurt!”

He gave me a humorless smile. “Then don’t get hit.”

My ribs throbbed. There’d probably be a welt there this evening. For a moment, I was tempted to throw down the blade and stalk back to the house. But I swallowed my pride and faced him again, resolved. I needed this. I needed to learn to defend myself, and the ones I cared about. I could take a few bruised ribs, if it meant saving a life one day.

Ash brandished his sword in an expert manner and cocked two fingers at me. “Again.”

For the rest of the morning, we practiced. Or, more accurately, I tried to hit Ash and received more swats that stung and burned their way through my clothes. He didn’t do it every time, and he never once cut me, but I became paranoid about getting hit. After several more thwaps that stung my pride as well as my skin, I tried switching to full defense mode, and Ash started attacking me.

I got hit a lot more.

Anger burned, flaring up after each swat, each effortless smack that left my skin tingling with failure. He wasn’t being fair. He had years, decades even, of swordplay, and he wasn’t even giving me a chance. He was toying with me instead of teaching me how to fend off his attacks. This wasn’t a lesson, this was just him showing off.

Finally, my temper snapped. After desperately fending off a series of blindingly quick thrusts, I received a swat to my backside that ignited a rage. Screaming, I flew at Ash, intending to hit him this time, to at least smack that calm efficiency off his face.

This time, Ash didn’t dodge or block, but spun and caught me around the waist as I charged past. Dropping his sword, he snatched my wrist in one hand and pulled me to his chest, holding me and the blade still as I cursed and struggled.

“There,” he murmured in a voice of weary satisfaction. “That’s what I was looking for.”

Though still angry, I stopped fighting him. My senses buzzed and I held myself rigid in his arms. “What?” I snarled. “Me to get so pissed I wanted to stab you in the eye?”

“The moment you’d take this seriously enough to *really* try to hit me.” Ash’s voice, dark and grim, made me freeze. He sighed, resting his forehead on the back on my skull. “This isn’t a hobby, Meghan,” he

breathed, sending a tingle down my spine. “It isn’t a game or a sport or a simple pastime. This is life and death. Any one of those hits could’ve killed you had I been serious. Putting a weapon in your hands means that, at some point, you’re going to have to use it. In a fight like this, you’re going to be hurt. Make a single mistake, and you’ll be dead. And I’ll lose…you.”

His voice trailed off at the end, as if that last part just slipped out. My throat closed, and all my anger drained away.

Ash pressed his lips to the welt across my shoulder, and my heartbeat stuttered. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, genuine regret in his voice. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I do want you to understand. Teaching you to fight means you’re going to be in even more danger, and I may be hard on you sometimes because I don’t want you to lose.” He released my wrist and ran his hand up to my shoulder, smoothing the hair from my neck. “Do you still want to continue?”

I couldn’t speak. I just nodded, and Ash kissed the back of my neck. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, drawing back even as I wished he would stay there forever. “Same time. Now, let’s go put something on those welts.”

* * *

I HEARD THE PIANO MUSIC as soon as we crossed the stream. My dad was sitting at the piano bench when we walked in, and didn’t look up from the keys. But the music today wasn’t as dark and frantic as it had been the night before; it was more calm and peaceful. Grimalkin lay atop the piano, feet tucked under him and eyes closed, purring in appreciation.

“Hi, Dad,” I ventured, wondering if he would actually look at me today.

The music faltered, and for a split second, I thought he was going to look up. But then his shoulders hunched and he went back to his playing, a little faster than before. Grimalkin didn’t bother to open his eyes.

“I guess that’s a start,” I sighed, as Ash disappeared into the kitchen for a moment. I heard him talking to a few unknown, high-pitched voices —Leanansidhe’s brownies?—before he reappeared holding a small tan jar. My dad continued to play. I tried to look calm and hopeful, but disappointment settled heavy on my chest, and Ash saw it, too.

He didn’t say anything as he led me upstairs to the loft, sitting me down on the neatly made bed after pulling off the bear rug. Opening the jar released a sharp, herbal scent that was oddly familiar, reminding me of a similar scene in a cold, icy bedroom, with Ash shirtless and bleeding and me binding up his wounds.

Below, the piano music continued, a low, mournful song that pulled at my insides. Ash knelt behind me on the bed and gently tugged the sleeve off my shoulder, just enough to expose the thin line of red slashed across my skin. I caught a flicker of remorse from him, a flash of dull regret, as a cold, tingling salve was spread over the wound.

“I’m still mad at you, you know,” I said without turning around. The dark piano chords made me moody and pensive, and I tried to ignore the cool fingers sliding over my ribs, leaving blessed numbness as they passed. “A little warning would’ve been nice. You couldn’t have said, ‘Hey, as part of your training today, I’m going to beat you senseless’?”

Ash reached around with both arms and put the jar into my hands, using that motion to pull me back to his chest. “Your father will be fine,” he murmured, as my chest ached with bottled-up grief. “It just takes a while for the mind to catch up on everything it has forgotten. Right now, he’s confused and frightened, and taking solace in the one thing that’s familiar. Just keep talking to him, and eventually he’ll start to remember.”

He smelled so good, a mix of frost and something sharp, like peppermint. Lifting my head, I placed a kiss at the hollow of his neck, right beneath his jawbone, and he drew in a quiet breath, his hands curling into fists. I suddenly realized we were on a bed, alone in an isolated cabin, with no grown-ups—lucid ones anyway—to point fingers or condemn. My heart sped up, thudding in my ears, and I felt his heartbeat quicken, too.

Shifting slightly, I went to trace another kiss along his jaw, but he ducked his head and our lips met, and suddenly I was kissing him as if I were going to meld him into my body. His fingers tangled in my hair, and my hands slid beneath his shirt, tracing the hard muscles of his chest and stomach. He groaned, pulled me into his lap, and lowered us back onto the bed, being careful not to crush me.

My whole body tingled, senses buzzing, my stomach twisting with so many emotions I couldn’t place them all. Ash was above me, his lips on mine, my hands sliding over his cool, tight skin. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t think. All I could do was *feel*.

Ash pulled back slightly, his silver eyes bright as he stared at me, his cool breath washing over my heated face.

"You are beautiful, you know that, right?" he murmured, all seriousness, one hand gently framing my cheek. "I know I don't say… things like that…as often as I should. I wanted to let you know."

"You don't have to say anything," I whispered, though hearing him admit it made my pulse flutter wildly. I could feel the emotion swirling around us, auras of color and light, and closed my eyes. "I can feel you," I murmured, as his heartbeat picked up under my fingers. "I can almost feel your thoughts. Is that very strange?"

"No," Ash said in a strangled voice, and a tremor went through him. I opened my eyes, staring into his perfect face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just…" He shook his head. "I never thought…I could feel like this again. I didn't know if it was possible." He sighed, giving me a pleading look. "I'm sorry, I'm not explaining it very well."

"It's all right." I laced my hands behind his head, smiling. "Right now, talking isn't what I was hoping for."

Ash smiled faintly, lowering his head again.

And froze.

Frowning, I arched my neck, looking behind us upside down, and let out a squeak.

Paul stood at the top of the stairs, staring at us with wide, blank eyes. Even though he didn't say a word and probably didn't understand what was happening, my cheeks flamed and I was instantly mortified. Ash rolled off me and stood, his face shutting into that blank, expressionless mask as I tried gathering the frayed strands of my composure long enough to speak.

Rolling upright, smoothing down my tangled hair and clothes, I glared at my father, who stared back in a daze. "Dad, what are you doing here?" I asked. "Why aren't you downstairs with the piano?" *Where you're supposed to be*, I added sourly. Not that I wasn't happy to see my dad actually looking at me for the first time since we got here, but his timing absolutely sucked.

Paul blinked, still staring at me in a fog, and didn't say anything. I sighed, shot an apologetic look at Ash, and started to lead him back down the stairs. "Come on, Dad. Let's go look for a certain cat I'm going to kill for not warning us."

“Why?” Paul whispered, and my heart jumped to my throat. He looked straight at me with wide, teary eyes. “Why am I…here? Who…who are you?”

The lump in my throat grew bigger. “I’m your daughter.” He stared at me blankly, and I gazed back, willing him to recognize me. “You were married to my mom, Melissa Chase. I’m Meghan. The last time you saw me, I was six years old, remember?”

“Daughter?”

I nodded breathlessly. Ash watched silently from the corner; I could feel his gaze on my back.

Paul shook his head, a sad, hopeless gesture. “I don’t…remember,” he said, and drew away from me, backing down the stairs, eyes clouding over once more.

“Dad—”

“Don’t remember!” His voice took on a pensive note, and I stopped as all sanity fled from his face. “Don’t remember! The rats scream, but I don’t remember! Go away, go away.” He ran to the piano and started pounding the keys, loud and frantic. I sighed and peered over the railing, watching him sadly.

Ash’s arms wrapped around me seconds later, drawing me back to his chest. “It’s a start,” he said, and I nodded, turning my face into his arm. “At least he’s talking now. He’ll remember eventually.”

Cool lips pressed against my neck, a brief, light touch, and I shivered. “Sorry about that,” I whispered, wishing, selfishly, that we hadn’t been interrupted. “I’m sure that’s never happened to you before.” Ash snorted, and I wondered if we could somehow reclaim that lost moment. I reached back and buried my fingers in his silky hair, pulling him closer. “What are you thinking about?”

“That this has put things in perspective,” he said, as the rumbling piano chords vibrated around us, dark and crazy. “That there are more important things to think about. We should be concentrating on your training, and what we’re going to do about the false king once it’s time. He’s still out there, looking for you.”

I pouted, not liking that statement. But Ash chuckled and ran his fingers up my arm. “We have time, Meghan,” he murmured. “After this is over, after your father regains his memories, after we deal with the false king, we’ll have the rest of our lives. I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

He held me tighter and brushed a kiss across my ear. “I’ll wait. Just tell me when you’re ready.”

He released me then and walked downstairs. But I stood on the balcony for several minutes, listening to the piano music and letting it take my thoughts to forbidden places.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SUMMER AND IRON

The days settled into a safe, if not comfortable, routine. At dawn, before the sunlight touched the forest floor, I went out to the little clearing to practice sword drills with Ash. He was a patient yet strict teacher, pushing me to stretch beyond my comfort zone and fight like I meant to kill him. He taught me defense, how to dance around an enemy without getting hit, how to turn my opponents' energy against them. As my skill and confidence grew and our practice scuffles became more serious, I began to see a pattern, a rhythm in the art of swordplay. It became more like a dance: a tempo of spinning, darting blades and constant footwork. I was still nowhere near as good as Ash, and never would be, but I was learning.

Afternoons were spent talking to my dad, trying to get him to come out of his crazy-shell, feeling as if I was repeatedly bashing my head against a wall. It was a slow and painful process. His moments of lucidity were few and far between, and he didn't recognize me half the time. Most of our days progressed with him playing the piano while I sat on the nearby armchair and spoke to him whenever the music stopped. Sometimes Ash was there, lying on the couch reading a book; sometimes he disappeared into the forest for hours at a time. I didn't know where he was going or what he was doing, until rabbit and other animals started showing up on the plates for dinner and it occurred to me that Ash might be impatient with the lack of progress, too.

One day, however, he came back and handed me a large, leather-bound book. When I opened it, I was shocked to find pictures of my family staring back at me. Pictures of my family…before. Paul and my mom, on their wedding day. A cute, mixed-breed puppy I didn't recognize. Me as an infant, then a toddler, then a grinning four-year-old riding a tricycle.

"I called in a favor," Ash explained to my stunned expression. "The bogey living in your brother's closet found it for me. Maybe it will help your father remember."

I hugged him. He held me lightly, careful not to push or respond in a way that might lead to temptation. I savored the feel of his arms around

me, breathing in his scent, before he gently pulled away. I smiled my thanks and turned to my father at the piano again.

"Dad," I murmured, carefully sitting beside him on the bench. He shot me a wary look, but at least he didn't flinch or jerk away and start banging on the piano keys. "I have something to show you. Look at this."

Opening the first page, I waited for him to look over. At first, he studiously ignored it, hunching his shoulders and not looking up. His gaze flickered to the album page once, but he continued to play, no change in his expression. After a few more minutes, I was ready to give up and retreat to the sofa to page through it myself, when the music suddenly faltered. Startled, I looked up at him, and my stomach twisted.

Tears were running down his face, splashing onto the piano keys. As I stared, transfixed, the music slowly stumbled to a halt, and my father began to sob. He bent over, and his long fingers traced the photos in the book as his tears dripped onto the pages and my hands. Ash quietly slipped from the room, and I put an arm around my dad and we cried together.

From that day on, he started to talk to me, slow, stuttering conversations at first, as we sat on the couch and thumbed through the photo album. He was so fragile, his sanity like spun glass that a breath of wind could shatter at any moment. But slowly, he began to remember Mom and me, and his old life, though he could never connect the little kid in the album with the teenager sitting beside him on the couch. He often asked where Mom and baby-Meghan were, and I had to tell him, again and again, that Mom was married to someone else now, that he had disappeared for eleven years, and she wasn't waiting for him anymore. And I had to watch the tears well in his eyes every time he heard it.

It made my soul ache.

Evenings were the hardest. Ash was as good as his word and never pushed, keeping all interactions between us light and easy. He never turned me away; when I needed someone to vent to after an exhausting day with my father, he was always there, quiet and strong. I would curl into him on the couch, and he would listen as I poured out my fears and frustrations. Sometimes we did nothing but read together, me lying in his lap while he turned the pages—though our tastes in books were vastly different, and I usually dozed off in the middle of a page. One night, bored and restless, I found a stack of dusty board games in a closet, and bullied Ash into learning Scrabble, checkers and Yahtzee. Surprisingly, Ash found that he

enjoyed these “human” games, and was soon asking *me* to play more often than not. This filled some of the long, restless evenings and kept my mind off certain things. Unfortunately for me, once Ash learned the rules, he was nearly impossible to beat in strategy games like checkers, and his long life gave him a vast knowledge of lengthy, complicated words he staggered me with in Scrabble. Though sometimes we’d end up debating whether or not faery terms like *Gwragedd Annwn* and *hobyahs* were legal to use.

Regardless, I cherished our time together, knowing this peaceful lull would come to an end someday. But there was an invisible wall between us now, a barrier only I could break, and it was killing me.

And, even though I didn’t want to, I missed Puck. Puck could always make me laugh, even when things were at their bleakest. Sometimes I’d catch a glimpse of a deer or a bird in the woods and wonder if it was Puck, watching us. Then I’d become angry at myself for wondering and spend the day trying to convince myself that I didn’t care where he was or what he was doing.

But I still missed him.

One morning, a few weeks later, Ash and I were finishing up our daily practice session when Grimalkin appeared on a nearby stone, watching us.

“You’re still telegraphing your moves,” Ash said as we circled each other, blades held up and ready. “Don’t look at the spot you’re trying to hit, let the sword go there on its own.” He lunged, cutting high at my head. I ducked and spun away, slashing at his back, and he parried the blow, looking pleased. “Good. You’re getting faster, too. You’ll be a match for most redcap thugs if they tried to start anything.”

I grinned at the compliment, but Grimalkin, who had been silent until now, said, “And what happens if they use glamour against her?”

I turned. Grimalkin sat with his tail around his feet, watching a yellow bumblebee bob over the grass in rapt fascination. “What?”

“Glamour. You know, the magic I tried to teach you once, before I discovered you had no talent for it whatsoever?” Grimalkin swatted at the bee as it came closer, missed, and pretended no interest at all as it zipped away. He sniffed and looked at me again, twitching his tail. “The Winter prince does not just use his sword when fighting—he has glamour at his disposal as well, as will your enemies. How are you planning to counter that, human?” Before I could answer, he perked up, his attention riveted on

a large orange butterfly flitting toward us, and leaped off the rock, vanishing into the tall grass.

I looked at Ash, who sighed and sheathed his blade. “He’s right, unfortunately,” he said, raking a hand through his hair. “Teaching you the sword was supposed to be only half of your training. I wanted you to learn how to use your glamour, as well.”

“I know how to use glamour,” I argued, still stinging from Grimalkin’s casual statement about my lack of talent. Ash raised an eyebrow, a silent challenge, and I sighed. “Fine, then. I’ll prove it. Watch this.”

He backed up a few steps, and I closed my eyes, reaching out to the forest around me.

Instantly, my mind was filled with all manner of growing things: the grass beneath my feet, the vines slithering along the ground, the roots of the trees surrounding us. In this clearing, Summer held full sway. Whether through Leanansidhe’s influence or something else, the plants here had not known the touch of winter, or cold, or death, for a long time.

Ash’s voice cut through my concentration, and I opened my eyes. “You do have a lot of power, but you need to learn control if you’re going to use it.” He bent down, plucked something from the grass, and held it up. It was a tiny flower, white petals still tightly closed, curled into a ball.

“Make it bloom,” Ash ordered softly.

Frowning, I stared at the little bud, mind racing. *Okay, I can do this. I’ve pulled up roots and made trees move and knocked a barrage of arrows from the air. I can make one teensy little flower bloom.* Still, I hesitated. Ash was right; I could feel the glamour all around me, but I was still unsure how to actually wield it.

“Would you like a hint?” Grimalkin asked from a nearby rock, startling me. I jumped, and he twitched an ear in amusement. “Picture the magic as a stream,” he continued, “then a ribbon, then a thread. When it is as thin as you can possibly make it, use it to gently tease the petals open. Anything more forceful will make the bloom split apart and cause the glamour to scatter.” He blinked sagely, then a butterfly near the stream caught his attention and he bounded off once more.

I looked at Ash, wondering if he was irritated at Grimalkin for helping me, but he only nodded. Taking a breath, I held the glamour in my mind, a swirling, colorful vortex of emotion and dream. Concentrating hard, I

shrank it down until it was a shimmering rope, then even further, until it was only a shining, oh-so-delicate thread in my mind.

Sweat beaded and rolled down my forehead, and my arms started to shake. Holding my breath, I carefully touched the flower with the glamour thread, coiling magic into the tiny bud and expanding gently. The petals shivered once and slowly curled open.

Ash nodded approval. I smiled, but before I could celebrate, a bout of dizziness hit me like a tidal wave, nearly knocking me down. The world spun violently, and I felt my legs give out, as if someone had pulled a plug and let all my magic drain away. Gasping, I pitched forward.

Ash caught me, holding me upright. I clung to him, feeling almost sick with weakness, frustrated that something so natural was this hard. Ash lowered us both to the ground, pulling back to watch me with troubled silver eyes.

"Is…is it normal to be this tired?" I asked, as feeling slowly returned to my legs. Ash shook his head, his face dark and grim.

"No. That little amount of glamour should have been nothing for you." He stood, crossing his arms over his chest, regarding me with a worried expression. "Something is wrong, and I don't know enough about Summer magic to help you." Holding out his hand, he pulled me to my feet with a sigh. "We're going to have to find Puck."

"What? No!" I let go of him too fast and stumbled, nearly falling again. "Why? We don't need Puck. What about Grimalkin? He can help, right?"

"Probably." Ash looked over to where Grimalkin was stalking butterflies through the grass, tail twitching in excitement. "Do you really want to ask him?"

I winced. "No, not really," I sighed. Stupid, favor-collecting cat. "Fine. But why Puck? Do you really think he'll know what's going on?"

Ash lifted one lean shoulder in a shrug. "I don't know. But he's been around longer than me and might know more about what's happening to you. The least we can do is ask."

"I don't want to see him." I crossed my arms, scowling. "He lied to me, Ash. And don't tell me that faeries can't lie—omitting the truth is just as bad. He let me believe my dad abandoned us, and he knew where he was all along. Eleven years, he lied to me. I can't forgive him for that."

“Meghan, believe me, I know what it’s like to hate Puck. I’ve been at it for longer than you, remember?” Ash softened his words with a rueful smile, but I still felt a stab of guilt. “Trust me, I don’t particularly want to go begging for his help, either.” He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “But if anyone is to teach you Summer magic, it should be him. I can only show you the basics, and you’re going to need more than that.”

My anger deflated. Of course, he was right. My shoulders sagged and I glared at him. “I hate it when you’re reasonable.”

He laughed. “Someone has to be. Come on.” He turned and held out a hand. “If we’re going to find Goodfellow, we should get started now. If he’s hiding, or if he doesn’t want to be found, we could be searching awhile.”

Taking his hand, I resigned myself as we crossed the meadow and slipped into the thick forest surrounding it.

* * *

In the end, Puck found us.

The woods surrounding the cabin were sprawling and vast, mostly pine and big, shaggy trees with furry trunks. It made me think we were high in the mountains somewhere. Ferns and pine needles littered the forest floor; the air was cool and smelled of sap.

Ash slipped through the woods like a ghost, following some invisible path, keen hunter instincts showing the way. As we hiked, ducking branches and scrambling over needle-covered rocks, my insides churned angrily. Why did Puck have to help us? What would he know? My dad’s face swam before me, tears shining from his eyes as I told him, once again, that Mom was married to someone else, and I clenched my fists. Whether my dad’s abduction was planned or not, Puck had a lot to answer for.

Ash brought us to a grotto surrounded by pine trees and stopped, gazing around. I joined him, taking his hand as we searched the trunks and shadows. It was very quiet. Threads of sunlight slanted in through the trees and dappled the forest floor, covered in mushrooms and pine needles. The trees here were old, thick creatures, and the air seemed filled with ancient magic.

“He’s been here,” Ash said, as a breeze stirred the branches, ruffling his dark hair. “In fact, he’s very close.”

“Looking for something?”

The familiar voice echoed from somewhere above us. I turned, and there was Puck, lying on an overhead branch, smirking at me. His shirt was off, showing a lean, bronzed chest, and his red hair was all over the place. He looked more…I don’t know…*fey* out here, something wild and unpredictable, more like Shakespeare’s Robin Goodfellow, who turned Nick Bottom into a donkey and wreaked havoc on the humans lost in the forest.

“Rumor going round these parts is that you’re looking for me,” he said, tossing an apple in one hand before biting into it. “Well, here I am. What do you want, *your highnesses?*”

I bristled at the implied insult, but Ash stepped forward. “Something is wrong with Meghan’s glamour,” he said, brief and to the point as usual. “You know more about Summer magic. We need to know what’s happened to her, why she can’t use glamour without almost passing out.”

“Ah.” Puck’s emerald eyes sparkled with glee. “And so they come crawling back for Puck’s help after all. Tsk tsk.” He shook his head and took another bite of the apple. “How easy it is to forget grudges when someone has something you need.”

I swelled indignantly, but Ash sighed, as if he’d expected this. “What do you want, Goodfellow?” he asked wearily.

“I want the princess to ask me,” Puck said, switching his gaze to mine. “I’ll be helping *her,* after all. I want to hear it from her own frosted pink lips.”

I pressed my pink lips together to keep back a nasty reply. *Glad to see at least one of us is being mature about this,* I wanted to say, which wouldn’t have been very mature at all. Besides, Ash was watching me, all solemn and serious, and a little bit pleading. If he could swallow his pride and ask his archnemesis for help, I guess I could be the grown-up here, too.

For now.

I sighed. “Fine.” *But there will be repercussions later, believe me.* “Puck, I’d really appreciate it if you helped me out a little.” He raised an eyebrow, and I grit my teeth. “Please.”

He flashed me a smug grin. “Help you out with what, princess?”

“My magic.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

I was sorely tempted to fling a rock at his head, but he wasn’t flashing me that stupid grin anymore, so maybe he was being serious. “I don’t know,” I sighed. “I can’t use glamour anymore without getting either really tired or really sick. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It didn’t used to be like this.”

“Huh.” Puck jumped down from the tree, landing as lightly as a cat. He took two steps toward us and stopped, peering at me with intense green eyes. “When was the last time you used glamour, princess? Without getting sick or tired?”

I thought back. I’d used Summer magic on the spider-hags and nearly thrown up with the effort. Before that, my glamour had been sealed by Mab, so… “The warehouse,” I answered, remembering the battle with another of Machina’s old lieutenants. “When we fought Virus. You were there, remember? I stopped her bugs from swarming all over us.”

Puck bobbed his head, looking thoughtful. “But that was *Iron* magic, wasn’t it, princess?” he asked, and I nodded. “When was the last time you used Summer glamour, normal glamour, without feeling sick or tired?”

“Machina’s realm,” Ash said softly, looking at me. Understanding was beginning to dawn on him, though I had no idea where this was leading. “You pulled up the roots to trap the Iron King,” he went on, “right before he stabbed you. Right before he died.”

“That’s where you got your Iron glamour, princess,” Puck added, nodding thoughtfully. “I’d bet Titania’s golden mirror on it. You somehow got stuck with Machina’s Iron magic—that’s why the false king wants you, I’d wager. It has something to do with the power of the Iron King.”

I shivered. Glitch had said as much, but I hadn’t wanted to think about it. “So what does that have to do with my glamour problems?” I asked.

Ash and Puck shared a look. “Because, princess,” Puck said, leaning back against a tree, “you have two powers inside you right now, Summer and Iron. And, simply put, they’re not getting along.”

“They can’t exist together,” Ash put in, as if he’d just figured it out. “Whenever you try, one glamour reacts violently to the other, the same way we react to iron. So the Summer glamour is making you sick because it touched Iron magic, and vice versa.”

Puck whistled. “Now that’s a Catch-22.”

“But…but I used Iron glamour before this,” I protested, not liking their explanations at all. “In the factory with Virus. And I didn’t have any problems then. We’d all be dead otherwise.”

“Your regular magic was sealed then.” Ash frowned, deep in thought. “When we went to Winter, Mab put a binding on you, sealing away your Summer magic. She didn’t know about the Iron glamour.” He looked up. “After the binding shattered, that’s when you started having difficulty.”

I crossed my arms in frustration. “This is so not fair,” I muttered, as Ash and Puck looked on with varying degrees of sympathy. I glared at them both. “What am I supposed to do now?” I demanded. “How am I supposed to fix this?”

“You’ll have to learn to use them both,” Ash said calmly. “There has to be a way to wield both glamours separately, without one tainting the other.”

“Maybe it’ll get easier with practice,” Puck added, and that irritating smirk came creeping back. “I could teach you. How to use Summer glamour at least. If you want me to.”

I stared at him, searching for a hint of my former best friend, for a spark of the affection we’d had for each other. The obnoxious smirk never wavered, but I saw something in his eyes, a glimmer of remorse, perhaps? Whatever it was, it was enough. I couldn’t do this alone. Something told me I was going to need all the help I could get.

“Fine,” I told him, watching his smile turn dangerously close to a leer. “But this doesn’t mean we’re okay. I still haven’t forgiven you for what you did to my family.”

Puck sighed dramatically and glanced at Ash. “Join the club, princess.”

CHAPTER EIGHT
UNDERSTANDING MEASURES

So, there we were again, the three of us: me, Ash, and Puck, together once more but not really the same. I practiced sword drills with Ash in the morning, and Summer magic with Puck in the afternoon, usually around the hottest part of the day. In the evenings, I listened to the piano or talked to my dad, while trying to ignore the obvious tension between the two faeries in the room. Paul was doing better, at least, his moments of confusion fewer and farther between. The morning he made breakfast, I got teary-eyed with relief, although our resident brownies threw a fit and nearly left the house. I was able to woo them back with bowls of cream and honey, and the promise that Paul wouldn't intrude on their chores again.

My glamour use didn't get any better.

Every day, when the sun was at its zenith, I'd leave the lunch table and wander down to the meadow, where Puck waited for me. He showed me how to call glamour from plants, how to make them grow faster, how to weave illusions from nothing, and how to call on the forest for help. Summer magic was the magic of life, heat, and passion, he explained. The new growth of Spring, the lethal beauty of fire, the violent destruction of a summer storm—all were examples of Summer magic in the everyday world. He demonstrated small miracles—making a dead flower come back to life, calling a squirrel right into his lap—and then instructed me to do the same.

I tried. Calling the magic was easy; it came as naturally as breathing. I could feel it all around me, pulsing with life and energy. But when I tried to use it in any way, nausea hit and I was left gasping in the dirt, so sick and dizzy I felt I would pass out.

"Try again," Puck said one afternoon, sitting cross-legged on a flat rock by the stream, chin in his hands. Between us, a mop handle stood upright in the grass like a naked tree. Puck had "borrowed" it from the broom closet earlier that morning, and would probably incur the wrath of the brownies when they discovered one of their sacred tools missing.

I glared at the mop handle, taking a deep breath. I was supposed to make the stupid thing bloom with roses and such, but all I'd done was given myself a massive headache. Drawing glamour to me, I tried again. *Okay, concentrate, Meghan. Concentrate…*

Ash appeared at the edge of my vision, arms crossed, watching us intently. "Any luck?" he murmured, easily breaking my concentration.

Puck gestured to me. "See for yourself."

Annoyed with them both, I focused on the mop. *Wood is wood,* Puck had said that morning. *Be it a dead tree, the side of a ship, a wooden crossbow, or a simple broom handle, Summer magic can make it come alive again, if only for a moment. This is your birthright. Concentrate.*

Glamour swirled around me, raw and powerful. I sent it toward the mop, and the sickness descended like a hammer, making my stomach clench. I doubled over with a gasp, fighting the urge to vomit. If this is what faeries experienced every time they touched something made of iron, it was no wonder they avoided it like the plague.

"This isn't working," I heard Ash say. "She should stop before she really gets hurt."

"No!" Pulling myself upright, I glared at the mop, wiping sweat from my eyes. "I'm going to get this, dammit." Ignoring my roiling stomach, the sweat that ran into my eyes, I took another deep breath and concentrated on the glamour swirling around the mop. The wood was alive, pulsing with energy, just waiting for the push that would make it explode with life.

The wooden pole trembled. Nausea crawled up my stomach. I bit my lip, welcoming the pain. And suddenly, roses burst into bloom along the handle, red and white and pink and orange, a riot of color among the leaves and thorns. As quickly as they had bloomed, the petals shriveled and fell off, littering the ground around the mop handle, bare and naked once more. But it was a clear victory, and I whooped in triumph—right before I collapsed.

Ash caught me, kneeling in the grass. How he knew exactly where to be whenever I fell was mystifying. "There," I panted, struggling upright, bracing myself against his arms. "That wasn't so hard. I think I'm getting the hang of this. Let's do it again, Puck."

Puck raised an eyebrow. "Uh, let's not, princess. Judging by the glare your boyfriend is shooting me, I'd say our lesson is officially over." He

yawned and stood, stretching his long limbs. “Besides, I was about to die of boredom. Watching flowers bloom isn’t exactly riveting.” He glanced at us, at Ash’s arms around me, and sneered. “See you tomorrow, lovebirds.”

He hopped the stream and vanished into the woods without looking back. I sighed and struggled to my feet, leaning on Ash for balance.

“You all right?” he asked, steadying me as the last of the nausea faded.

Anger flared. No, I wasn’t all right. I was a freaking faery who couldn’t use glamour! Not without fainting, throwing up, or getting so dizzy I was practically useless. I was allergic to myself! How pathetic was that?

Peevishly, I turned and kicked the mop handle, sending the pole clattering into the bushes. The wrath of the brownies would be swift and terrible, but at that moment I didn’t care. What good was having Iron glamour if all it did was make me sick? At this point, I was ready to *give* the false king his stupid Iron magic, for all the good it did me.

Ash raised an eyebrow at my show of temper but didn’t say anything beyond, “Let’s go inside.” A little embarrassed, I followed him across the clearing, over the stream and up the stairs to the cabin, where Grimalkin lay on the railing in the sun and ignored me when I waved.

The cabin was strangely quiet as we walked in, the piano empty and still. I looked around and saw Paul sitting at the kitchen table, bent over a mess of scattered papers, pen scribbling furiously. I hoped he hadn’t fallen into creative insanity. But he glanced up, gave me a brief, noncrazy smile, and hunched over the paperwork once more. So today was one of his saner days; at least that was something.

Groaning, I collapsed to the couch, my fingers numb and tingly with leftover glamour. “What’s wrong with me, Ash?” I sighed, rubbing my tired eyes. “Why does everything have to be so hard? I can’t even be a normal half-faery.”

Ash knelt and tugged my hands down, pressing my fingers to his lips. “You were never normal, Meghan.” He smiled, and my fingers went tingly for an entirely different reason. “If you were, I wouldn’t be here now.”

I freed my fingers and stroked his cheek, running my thumb over the smooth, pale skin. For a moment, he closed his eyes and leaned into my hand before brushing a kiss to my palm and standing up. “I’m going to find Puck,” he announced. “There must be something we’re missing, something we’re overlooking. There has to be an easier way.”

“Well, if you find it, that would be great. I’m sick of being…sick… every time I make a flower grow.” I tried for a grateful smile, but think I just grimaced at him. Ash placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezed gently, and left the room.

Sighing, I wandered over to the kitchen table, curious to see what Dad was working on so vigorously. He didn’t look up this time, so I perched on the edge beside him. The table was covered with sheets of paper, scribbled with lines and black dots. Looking closer, I saw they were hand-drawn sheet music.

“Hey, Dad.” I spoke softly, not wanting to distract or startle him. “What are you doing?”

“Composing a song,” he replied, glancing at me briefly and smiling. “It just hit me this morning, and I knew I had to write it down quickly before I lost it. I used to write songs all the time for…for your mother.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I watched the pencil move, scribbling dots along five simple black lines. It didn’t look like music to me, but Dad would stop and close his eyes, swaying the pencil to an invisible tune, before adding more dots to the lines.

My vision went fuzzy for a moment, and the dots seemed to move on the paper. For just a second, the entire song shimmered with glamour. The strict, straight lines gleamed like metal wires, while the various notes, once black and solid, sparkled like drops of water held up to light. Startled, I blinked, and the scribbles became normal again.

“Weird,” I muttered.

“What’s weird?” Paul asked, looking up.

“Um.” Quickly, I searched for a safer topic. Dad didn’t have a high regard for glamour, seeing it as nothing more than faery tricks and deception. With everything he’d gone through, I couldn’t blame him. “Um,” I said again. “I was just wondering…what all those little dots and lines are for. I mean, it doesn’t look like music to me.”

Paul smiled, eager to talk about his favorite subject, and pulled a full sheet of paper from a stack. “They’re measures,” he explained, placing the sheet between us. “See these lines? Each line represents a musical pitch. Every note on a scale is represented by its position on the line or in the spaces between. The higher the note is on the lines, the higher the pitch. Follow me so far?”

“Ummm…”

“Now, notice the different dots, or notes,” Dad went on, as if I understood anything he just said. “An open dot plays longer than a closed dot. The little stems and flags you see cut the time in half, and in half again. The appearance of the notes tells the player how long to hold them, and what note to play. Everything is measured by time, pitch, and scale, written in perfect harmony. One note or measure in the wrong place will throw off the entire song.”

“Sounds very complicated,” I offered, trying to keep up with his explanation.

“It can be. Music and math have always been tied closely together. It’s all about formulas and fractions and such.” Paul stood abruptly with the sheet of music and walked over to the piano. I trailed behind him and perched on the couch. “But then, you put it all together, and it sounds like *this*.”

And he played a song so beautiful it caught in my throat, making me want to smile and laugh and cry all at the same time. I’d heard his music before, but this was different, as if he’d put his entire heart and soul into it, and it had grown a life of its own. Glamour flared and swirled around him, a vortex of the most gorgeous colors I’d ever seen. No wonder the fey were attracted to talented mortals. No wonder Leanansidhe had been so reluctant to let him go.

The piece was short and ended abruptly, as if Paul just ran out of notes. “Well, it’s not finished yet,” he murmured, lowering his hands, “but you get the idea.”

“What’s it called?” I whispered, the echo of the song still ebbing through me. Paul smiled.

“Memories of Meghan.”

Before I could say anything, the door banged open and Ash stepped through with Puck close behind him. I jumped up as Ash crossed the room, his face tight and severe, and Puck stood in front of the door with his arms crossed, glaring out the window.

“What’s going on?” I asked as Ash drew close, looking like he wanted to sweep me up and rush out the door. I glanced at my dad to see how this was affecting him, relieved to see he looked wary and alarmed but not crazy. Ash took my arm and drew me away.

“The Seelie and Unseelie Courts,” he muttered, low enough that my father couldn’t hear. “They’re here, and they’re looking for you.”

CHAPTER NINE
A KNIGHT'S VOW

I blinked at Ash, and my stomach squirmed weirdly, both in excitement and fear. "Both of them?" I whispered, glancing at my dad, who had wandered back to the table and was hunched over his music again. He tended to ignore the faeries whenever they were in the room, never speaking to them, barely looking their way, and the boys were content to return the favor. It made for some awkward evenings, but I think Paul was terrified that if he drew their attention, he would go mad once more.

Ash shrugged. "They wouldn't talk to me or Puck, except to say that Leanansidhe already gave them permission to come here. They want to speak with you. They're in the clearing now."

I walked to the window and peered out. At the edge of the trees, I could just make out a pair of sidhe knights each holding a banner, one green and gold and emblazoned with the head of a magnificent stag, the other black with a white, thorny rose in the center.

"The emissary said he had a message specifically for you, princess," Puck said, leaning against the door with his arms crossed. "Said it was from Oberon himself."

"Oberon." The last time I saw my biological father, he had banished me to the mortal realm after Mab had done the same to Ash. I thought we had severed all ties; he'd made that quite clear when we parted, that I was on my own and Faery would never welcome me again. What did the King of the Summer Court want with me now?

Only one way to find out. "Dad," I called, turning toward the table, "I'm leaving now, but I'll be right back. Don't leave the house, okay?"

He waved at me without looking up, and I sighed. At least Paul would be too busy to worry about the unexpected party in the meadow. "All right," I muttered, walking toward the door, which Puck opened for me. "Let's get this over with."

We crossed the stream, where Grimalkin was grooming himself on a flat rock, unconcerned with the arrival of the courts, and headed toward the far side of the meadow. It was late afternoon, and fireflies winked over

the grass. Ash and Puck walked beside me, protective auras glowing strong, and any fear I had vanished instantly. We had been through so much, the three of us. What was left, that we couldn't face together?

The two knights bowed as we approached. I caught a glimmer of surprise from both Ash and Puck, amazement that two warriors from opposite courts could be in the presence of the other without fighting. I found it amusingly ironic.

Between the knights, almost hidden in the tall grass, a potato-faced gnome stepped forward and bent forward at the waist. "Meghan Chase," he greeted in a surprisingly deep voice, stiff and formal like a butler. "Your father, Lord Oberon, sends his greetings."

I felt a flicker of annoyance. Oberon had no right to claim me as his daughter. Not after disowning me in front of the entire freaking court. Crossing my arms, I glared down at the gnome. "You wanted to see me. Here I am. What does Oberon want now?"

The gnome blinked. The knights exchanged a glance. Puck and Ash stood tall beside me, silent and protective. Even though I wasn't looking at them, I could sense Puck's gleeful amusement.

The gnome cleared his throat. "Ahem. Well, as you know, princess, your father is at war with the Iron Kingdom. For the first time in centuries, we have created a mutual alliance with Queen Mab and the Winter Court." His gaze flicked to Ash before focusing on me again. "An army of Iron fey crouches at our doorstep, eager to taint our land and kill everyone in it. The situation has become most dire."

"I know that. In fact, I think I was the one to first tell Oberon about it. Right before he exiled me." I held the gnome's gaze, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice. "I warned Oberon about the Iron King ages ago, him and Mab both. They didn't listen to me. Why are you telling me this now?"

The gnome sighed and, for a moment, lost his formal tone. "Because, princess, the courts cannot touch him. The Iron King hides deep within his poisonous realm, and the forces of Summer and Winter cannot penetrate far enough to strike at him. We are losing ground, soldiers, and resources, and the Iron fey continue to advance on both courts. The Nevernever is dying faster than ever, and soon there will be no safe place for us to go."

He cleared his throat again, looking embarrassed, and became proper once more. "Because of this, King Oberon and Queen Mab are prepared to

offer you a deal, Meghan Chase." He reached into his bag and drew forth a scroll tied with a green ribbon, unrolling it with a flourish.

"Here we go," muttered Puck.

The gnome frowned at him, then turned to the scroll and announced in a grand, important voice, "Meghan Chase, by order of King Oberon and Queen Mab, the courts are willing to lift your exile, as well as the exiles of Prince Ash and Robin Goodfellow, abolishing all crimes and rendering full pardons."

Puck drew in a sharp breath. Ash stood silently; no expression showed on his face, but I caught the briefest flicker of hope, of longing. They wanted to go home. They missed Faery, and who could blame them? They belonged there, not in the mortal world, with its vast skepticism and disbelief in anything but science. Small wonder the Iron fey were taking over the world; so few people believed in magic anymore.

But, because I knew faery bargains never came without a price, I kept my expression blank and asked, "In return for what?"

"In return…" The gnome dropped his hands, averting his eyes. "For journeying into the Iron Realm and eliminating its king."

I nodded slowly, suddenly very tired. "That's what I thought."

Ash moved closer, drawing wary looks from the gnome and the two guards. "By herself?" he said quietly, masking the anger beneath. "Oberon isn't offering any help? Seems a lot to ask, if his own armies can't get through."

"King Oberon believes that a single person could move unseen through the Iron Realm," the gnome replied, "and thus have a better chance of finding the Iron King. Both Oberon and Mab agree that the Summer princess is the best choice—she is immune to iron's effects, she has been there before, and she has already taken down one Iron King."

"I had help then," I muttered, feeling a tightness spreading through my stomach. Memories rose up, bleak and terrifying, and despite myself, my hands started to shake. I remembered the awful wasteland of the Iron Kingdom: the blasted desert, the acid, flesh-eating rain, the imposing black tower, rising into the sky. I remembered killing Machina, driving an arrow through his chest, as the whole tower crumbled into shrapnel. And I remembered Ash, his body cold and lifeless in my arms, and clenched my fists so hard that my nails dug into my palms.

“I’m not ready,” I said, looking to Ash and Puck for reassurance. “I can’t go back there yet. I still have to learn to fight and to use glamour, and…and what about my dad? He can’t stay here by himself.”

The gnome blinked, looking confused, but Puck spoke up before he could say anything. “She’ll need some time to think about it,” he said, stepping forward with a disarming grin. “I assume Oberon doesn’t need an answer right this very second, does he?”

The gnome regarded him gravely, yet spoke to me. “He did say time was of the essence, your highness. The longer you remain here, the farther the corruption spreads, and the stronger the Iron King becomes. Lord Oberon cannot wait. We will return at dawn for your answer.” He bowed, and the knights stepped back, preparing to leave. “This is a onetime offer, highness,” the gnome cautioned. “If you choose not to accept Oberon’s offer and return to the Nevernever with us, none of you will ever see it again.” He rolled up the paper with a flourish, and disappeared into the woods with the guards.

I walked back to the cabin in a daze, sinking onto the couch. Dad wasn’t in the room, and the brownies hadn’t started dinner yet, so we were alone. “I’m not ready,” I said again, as Puck perched on the other arm and Ash stood, watching me gravely. “I barely took down the first Iron King, and that was with the Witchwood arrow. I don’t have anything like that now.”

“True,” came Grimalkin’s voice beside my head, making me jump. The cat blinked at my glare and settled comfortably onto the back cushions. “But that was specifically for Machina. You do not know if that is needed for the false king.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I don’t have anything this time. I still can’t use glamour well, I don’t know how I’ll do in a fight and—” I paused, nearly whispering the words “—I can’t do it alone.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Puck stood and joined Ash in glaring at me. “What are you talking about, doing it alone? You know we’re going to be right there with you, princess.”

I shook my head. “Ash nearly died last time. The Iron Kingdom is deadly to fey, that’s why Oberon and Mab can’t beat it. I can’t lose you both. If I do this, I have to do it alone.”

I felt Ash’s gaze sharpen, cutting into me. His fury was a cold, icy color, and it pricked my skin even as I felt my own anger rise up to meet

it. He should know. Out of everyone, Ash knew how lethal the Iron Kingdom was to normal fey. What right did he have to be angry? I was the one who had to go into the Iron Kingdom. There was no way I'd put either of them through that torture again. I'd refuse Oberon's so-called deal, if it came to that.

And yet, if I refused, Ash and Puck would be stuck with me in the mortal realm, forever. This was their chance to go home. I couldn't deny them that, even if it meant I had to journey into the blasted land of the Iron fey once more and face the false king by myself.

"You know that's not going to work, princess," Puck said, reading my thoughts. "If you think you can keep me or ice-boy from following you into the Iron Realm—"

"I don't want you there!" I burst out, finally looking up. He blinked at me in astonishment, though Ash continued to stare at me with ice-cold eyes. "Dammit, Puck, you didn't see the Iron Realm. You don't know what it's like. Ask Ash!" I continued, pointing at the Ice Prince, knowing I was pushing him dangerously and not caring. "Ask him how just breathing the air was killing him from the inside. Ask him how I felt, watching him get worse and worse and not being able to do anything."

"And yet, I'm still here." Ash's voice was like brittle frost, his eyes darkened to black. "And it seems my promise means nothing to you. Will you release me from it now, when it is convenient to do so?"

"Ash." I looked up at him, hating that he was angry, but needing him to understand. "I can't watch you suffer again, not like that. If you follow me into the Iron Kingdom again, you could die, and that would kill me, too. You can't ask me to do that."

"It…" Ash stopped, closed his eyes for a moment. "It wasn't your choice, Meghan," he continued in a forced, even voice. "I knew the risks when I made that deal, and I know what will happen if I follow you into the Iron Realm. I would go with you, regardless." His voice grew sharper. "But that is beside the point. I *cannot* leave you now, unless you officially release me from my vow to stay."

Release him? Unmake a vow so he wasn't forced to follow me? "I didn't know you could do that," I murmured, feeling a brief regret and a little anger. "So, all that time in Machina's realm, I could have released you, and you wouldn't have had to help me?"

Ash hesitated, as if he didn't want to talk about it any longer, but Grimalkin spoke up from the back of the couch. "No, human," he purred. "That was a contract, not a *promise.* You both agreed to something, and you both got something out of it. That is the way of most bargains." Ash looked down, running a hand through his hair as Grimalkin licked a front paw. "A vow is made willingly, is self-inflicted, and places no requirements upon the recipient. No expectations whatsoever." He sniffed and scrubbed the paw over his ears. "Leaving the one trapped, completely at the mercy of the other…unless they decide to release him, of course."

"So…" I glanced at Ash. "I could release you from your promise, and you'd no longer have to keep it, right?"

Ash looked stricken, but only for a heartbeat. Then the air around him turned frigid, and frost crept over the wooden floor slats. Without a word, he turned and left the room, gliding through the front door and vanishing into the night.

Puck let out an explosive breath. "Ouch. You really know how to tear a guy's heart out, don't you, princess?"

I stared at the front door, feeling my heart sink. "Why is he so angry?" I whispered. "I'm just trying to keep him alive. I don't want him following me because he's being *forced* to by some stupid vow."

Puck winced. "That *stupid* vow is the most serious declaration we can make, princess," he said, and the edge in his voice surprised me. "We don't make promises lightly, if ever. And incidentally, releasing a faery from a vow is the worst insult in the world. You're basically telling him you don't trust him anymore, that you believe he's incapable of carrying it out."

I stood up. "That's not true at all," I protested, as Grimalkin slid from the back cushions to curl up in the spot I'd vacated. "I just don't want him staying with me because he *has* to."

"Jeez, you're thick sometimes." Puck shook his head as I gaped at him. "Princess, Ash would never have made that vow if he wasn't planning on following you anyway. Even if he never spoke it, do you think you could force him to stay behind?" He sneered. "I know you couldn't force *me*—I'm going with you whether you like it or not, so you can stop glaring. But, by all means…." He waved a hand at the door. "Go find ice-boy and free him from his silly promise. You'll never see him again, that's for certain.

That's basically what releasing a faery means—you don't want them around any longer."

I slumped in defeat. "I just…I only wanted…I can't watch either of you die," I muttered again, a weak excuse that sounded lamer by the second. Puck snorted.

"Come on, Meghan. A little faith, please?" He crossed his arms and gave me an annoyed look. "You're writing us off before we even get started. Me and ice-boy both. I've been around a long time, I intend to be around awhile longer."

"I didn't think it would come this soon." I started to sink back onto the couch, but stood up quickly as Grimalkin hissed at me. "I mean, I knew I had to face him eventually, the false king. But I thought I'd have more time to get ready." I scooted over a few feet, away from the cat, and perched on the arm. "All this time, I've felt that I've just been floundering, getting lucky again and again. That luck's going to run out someday."

"It got us this far, princess." Puck walked over and put an arm around me. I didn't shrug it off. I was tired of fighting. I wanted my best friend back. Leaning against him, I listened to the brownies scuttle back and forth in the kitchen. The smell of baking bread wafted into the room, warm and comforting. Our last meal, perhaps?

Way to think positive, Meghan.

"You're right," I said. "And I have to do this. I know that. If I ever want a normal life, I have to face the false king or he'll never leave me alone." I sighed and walked over to the window, brooding into the coming twilight. "It's just…this time it feels different," I said, seeing my reflection in the glass, staring back at me. "I have so much more to lose. You and Ash, the Nevernever, my family, my dad." I stopped, resting my forehead against the glass. "My dad," I groaned. "What am I going to do with my dad?"

There was a thump from the hallway, and I closed my eyes. Well, that was just about perfect timing. I sighed and straightened up. "How long have you been standing there, Dad?"

"From about the time you were talking about luck." Paul came into the room, sitting across on the piano bench. I watched him in the glass reflection. "You're leaving, aren't you?" he asked softly.

Puck stood and discreetly wandered out the door, leaving me and Dad alone except for the snoozing Grimalkin. I hesitated, then nodded. “I hate to leave you alone like this,” I said, turning around. “I wish I didn’t have to go.”

Paul’s brow was furrowed, as if he was struggling to understand, but his eyes remained clear as he slowly nodded. “This is…important?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Will you be back?”

My throat closed. I swallowed and took a deep breath to open it. “I hope so.”

“Meghan.” Dad hesitated, fighting for words. “I know…I don’t understand a lot of things. I know you’re…part of something beyond me, something I won’t ever understand. And I’m supposed to be your father, but…but I know you can handle yourself just fine. So, you go.” He smiled then, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing. “Don’t say goodbye, and don’t worry about me. You do what you have to do. I’ll be here when you come back.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks, Dad.”

He nodded, but then his eyes went glassy, as if he’d used up his allotment of sanity with that conversation. Sniffing the air, he perked up, his face brightening like a little kid’s. “Food?”

I nodded, feeling suddenly old. “Yeah. Why don’t you go back to your room, and I’ll call you when dinner is ready, okay? You can…work on your song until then.”

“Oh. Right.” He beamed at me as he rose, walking back to the hallway. “It’s almost done, you know,” he announced over his shoulder, swelling with pride. “It’s for my daughter, but I’ll play it for you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered, and he was gone.

Silence filled the room, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall and the occasional scuffle from the kitchen. I walked back to the couch and sank down next to Grimalkin, uncertain what to do next. I knew I should find Ash and apologize, or at least explain why I hadn’t wanted him to come. My stomach was in knots, knowing he was angry with me. I had only wanted to spare him more pain; how was I supposed to know releasing a faery from his promise was such a breach of trust?

“If you are so worried about him,” Grimalkin said into the quiet, “why not ask him to be your knight?”

I blinked at him. “What?”

His eyes cracked open, slitted and gold, watching me in amusement. “Your knight,” he said again, slower this time. “You do understand the word, do you not? It has not been that long for humans to forget.”

“I know what a knight is, Grim.”

“Oh, good. Then it should be easy for you to understand the significance.” Grimalkin sat up and yawned, curling his tail around his legs. “It is an old tradition,” he began. “Even among the fey. A lady asks a warrior to become her knight, her chosen protector, for as long as they both draw breath. Only those with royal blood can enact this ritual, and the choosing of a champion is something only the lady can do. But it is the ultimate show of faith between the lady and the knight, for she trusts him above all others to keep her safe, knowing that he would lay down his life for her. The knight still obeys his queen and court, to the best of his ability, but his first and only duty is to his lady.” He yawned again and stuck one hind leg into the air, examining his toes. “A charming tradition, to be sure. The courts love such dramatic tragedies.”

“Why is it a tragedy?”

“Because,” came Ash’s voice from the doorway, making me jump, “should the lady die, the knight will die, as well.”

I stood quickly, heart pounding. Ash didn’t enter the room, continuing to watch me from the frame. His glamour aura was hidden, carefully concealed, and his silver eyes were cold and blank. “Walk with me outside,” he ordered softly, and when I hesitated, added, “please.”

I glanced at Grimalkin, but the cat was curled up once more with his eyes closed, purring in content. *Wretched cat*, I thought, following Ash down the stairs into the warm summer night. *He wouldn’t care if Ash cut me down or turned me into an icicle. Probably has a bet going with Leanansidhe to see how long that will take.*

Shocked and feeling guilty that I could think that, about both Ash and Grimalkin, I trailed the Winter prince across the stream and through the meadow in silence. Fireflies hovered over the grass, turning the clearing into a tiny galaxy of winking lights, and a breeze ruffled my hair, smelling of pine and cedar. I realized I would miss this place. Despite everything, it was the closest to normal I’d come in a long time. Here, I wasn’t a faery

princess, I wasn't the daughter of a powerful king, or a pawn in the eternal struggles of the courts. Tomorrow at dawn, that would all change.

"If you're going to release me," Ash murmured, and I heard the faintest tremor beneath his voice, "do it now so that I can go. I'd rather not be here when you return to the Nevernever."

I stopped, which made him stop, though he didn't turn around. I gazed at his back, at the strong shoulders and midnight-dark hair, at the proud, stiff set of his spine. Waiting for me to determine his fate. *If you really cared for him,* a voice whispered in my mind, *you would set him free. You'd be apart, but he would still be alive. Letting him follow you into the Iron Realm could kill him, you know that.* But the thought of him leaving punched a hole in my heart that left me gasping inside. I couldn't do it. I couldn't let him go. Gods forgive me if I was being selfish, but I wanted nothing more than to stay with him forever.

"Ash," I murmured, which made him flinch, bracing himself. My heart pounded, but I ignored my doubts and hurried on. "I…will…" Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and whispered, "Will you be my knight?"

He spun, eyes widening for the briefest of moments. For a few heartbeats, he stared at me, surprise and disbelief written across his face. I gazed back, wondering if it had been a mistake to ask, if I had only bound him further and he would resent being forced into another contract.

I shivered as he approached, coming to stand just a few inches away. Slowly, he reached for my hand, barely holding my fingers as his eyes met mine. "Are you sure?" he asked, so quietly the breeze might've blown it away.

I nodded. "But, only if you want to. I would never force—"

Releasing my hand, he took a half step back, and then lowered himself to one knee, bowing his head. My heart turned over, and I bit my lip, blinking back tears.

"My name is Ashallyn'darkmyr Tallyn, third son of the Unseelie Court." Though his voice was soft, it never wavered, and I felt breathless at hearing his full name. His True Name. "Let it be known—from this day forth, I vow to protect Meghan Chase, daughter of the Summer King, with my sword, my honor, and my life. Her desires are mine. Her wishes are mine. Should even the world stand against her, my blade will be at her side. And should it fail to protect her, let my own existence be forfeit. This I swear, on my honor, my True Name, and my life. From this day on…"

His voice went even softer, but I still heard it as though he whispered it into my ear. “I am yours.”

I couldn’t stop the tears anymore. They clouded my vision and rolled down my cheeks, and I didn’t bother to wipe them away. Ash stood, and I threw myself into his arms, feeling him tremble as he crushed me close. He was mine now, my knight, and nothing would come between us.

“Well,” Puck sighed, his voice drifting over the grass. “I was wondering how long it would take to get to that.”

I turned, and Ash released me, very slowly. Puck sat on a rock near the stream, fireflies buzzing around him, alighting in his hair and making it glow like embers. He wasn’t smirking or sneering at us. Just watching.

A flicker of alarm rippled through me as he hopped up and approached, trailing fireflies. How long had he been there, watching us? “Did you hear…?”

“Ice-boy’s True Name? Nah.” Puck shrugged, lacing his hands behind his head. “Hard as it is to believe, I wouldn’t intrude on something that serious, princess. Especially since I know you’d kill me later.” One corner of his lip twitched, just slightly, nowhere near his usual wide grin. He glanced at Ash and shook his head, his expression one of amusement and…could it be respect? “Mab is going to love that, you know.”

Ash gave a faint smile. “I find I no longer care what the Winter Court thinks of me.”

“It’s liberating, isn’t it?” Puck snorted, then sat down in the grass, turning his face to the sky. “So, this is our last night as exiles, huh?” he mused, leaning back on his elbows. Fireflies rose from the grass in a blinking cloud. “It seems weird, but I might actually miss this. No one pulling my strings, no one bossing me around—except irate brownies demanding their brooms back, putting spiders in my bed. It’s…relaxing.” Glancing at me, he patted the ground.

I lowered myself into the cool, damp grass as blips of amber and green buzzed around us, landing on my hands, in my hair. Looking at Ash, I took his hand and tugged him down, as well. He settled behind me, lacing his arms around my waist, and I leaned against him and closed my eyes. In another life, perhaps, it would’ve been the three of us: me, my best friend, and my boyfriend, just hanging out under the stars, maybe breaking curfew, worried about nothing except school and parents and homework.

“What are we doing, here?” came Grimalkin’s voice as the cat slipped through the grass beside me, bottlebrush tail in the air. A firefly landed on the tip, and he flicked it off irritably. “This looks remarkably close to relaxing, if I did not know a certain prince is far too uptight to relax.”

Ash chuckled and drew me tighter against him. “Feeling left out, cait sith?”

Grimalkin sniffed. “Do not flatter yourself.” But he minced his way across the grass and curled up in my lap, a warm heavy weight with soft gray fur. I scratched behind his ear, and he vibrated with purrs.

“Do you think my dad will be all right?” I asked, and Grimalkin yawned.

“He will be safer here than he would be in the real world, human,” the cat replied in a lazy voice. “No one enters this place without Leanansidhe’s permission, and no one leaves unless she allows it. Do not worry overmuch.” He flexed his claws, looking content. “The human will still be here when you return. Or even if you do not. Now, if you would attend to the other ear, that would be nice. Ah…yes, that is quite satisfactory.” His voice trailed off into rumbling purrs.

Ash laid his cheek against the back of my head and sighed. It wasn’t a sigh of irritation or anger or the melancholy that seemed to plague him at times. He sounded…content. Peaceful, even. It made me a little sad, knowing we couldn’t have more time, that this could be our last night together, without war and politics and faery laws coming between us.

Ash brushed the hair from my neck and leaned close to my ear, his voice so soft not even Grimalkin could’ve heard it. “I love you,” he murmured, and my heart nearly burst out of my chest. “Whatever happens, we’re together now. Always.”

We sat there, the four of us, talking quietly or just basking in the silence, watching the night sky. I didn’t see any falling stars, but if I had, I would’ve wished my dad be kept safe, that Ash and Puck would survive the coming war, and that somehow, we all would come out of this okay. *If wishes were horses.* I knew better. Fairy godmothers didn’t exist, and even if they did, they wouldn’t wave a magic wand and make everything better. (Not without a contract, anyway.) Besides, I had something better than a fairy godmother; I had my faery knight, my faery trickster, and my faery cat, and that was enough.

In the end, it didn’t matter. A simple wish wouldn’t save us from what we had to do, and my mind was made up. When dawn turned the sky pink and the envoys came for us again, I already had my answer.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TEN
THE EDGE OF IRON

Faery was not how I remembered.

I recalled the first time I stepped into the Nevernever through the door in Ethan's closet. I remembered the enormous trees, so close and tangled that their branches shut out the sky, the mist writhing along the ground, the perpetual twilight that hung over everything. Here in the wyldwood, neither court held sway; it was a fierce, neutral territory that cared nothing for the medieval customs of Summer or the vicious society of Winter.

And it was dying.

It was a subtle thing, the taint that had sunk deep into the land and forest, corrupting them from the inside. Here and there, a tree was empty of leaves, and a rosebush had steel thorns that glinted in the light. I walked into a spiderweb, only to discover it was made of hair-thin wires, much like the net the spider-hags had used on me. Outwardly, the change was faint, almost invisible. But the beating heart of the Nevernever, which I felt all around me in every tree, every leaf and blade of grass, was pulsing with rot. Everything was touched with Iron glamour, and it was slowly eating away the Nevernever, like paper held above a flame.

And, judging from the twin looks of horror on the faces of Ash and Puck, they felt it, too.

"It's awful, isn't it?" said the gnome envoy, gazing around solemnly. "Not long after you were…ahem…banished, the Iron King's army attacked, and wherever they went, the Iron Realm spread with them. The combined forces of Summer and Winter were able to drive them back, but even after they were gone, the poison remained. Our armies are camped on the edge, where the wyldwood meets the Iron Kingdom, to try to halt the Iron fey that keep pouring from the breach."

"You're only defending the line?" Ash turned his cold gaze on the gnome, who shrank from him. "What about a frontal assault, to close it completely?"

The gnome shook his head. "It doesn't work. We've sent numerous forces into the breach, but none of them have ever come back."

“And the Iron King has never once showed his ugly face in battle?” Puck asked. “He just sits back like a coward and lets the army come to him?”

“Of course he does.” Grimalkin sniffed, wrinkling his whiskers in distaste. “Why would he endanger himself when he has all the advantages? He has time on his side—the courts do not. Oberon and Mab must be desperate if they are willing to lift your exile. I cannot think of another time when they have been willing to retract their orders.” He blinked and looked at me, narrowing his eyes. “Things must indeed be serious. It appears you are the final hope to save the entire Nevernever.”

“Thanks, Grim. I certainly needed that reminder.” I sighed, pushing bleak, terrifying thoughts to the back of my mind, and turned to the emissary. “I suppose Oberon is waiting for me?”

“He is, your highness.” The gnome bobbed his head and pattered off. “This way, please. I will take you to the battlefront.”

* * *

FROM THE TOP OF THE RISE, I looked down into the valley where the Summer and Winter armies were camped.

Tents were set up in a loose, haphazard pattern, looking like a small city of colored cloth and muddy streets. Even from this distance, I could see the distinction between the Seelie and Unseelie: the Seelie preferred lighter, summer-colored tents of brown and green and yellow, while the Unseelie camp was marked by shades of black, blue, and dark red. Even though they were on the same side, Summer and Winter did not mingle, did not share the same space or even the same side of the valley. In the center, however, where the two camps seemed to converge, a larger structure rose into the air, flying the banners of the two courts side by side. At least Mab and Oberon were trying to get along. For now, anyway.

Beyond the camps, a twisted forest of glimmering steel marked the entrance into the realm of the Iron King.

Beside me, Ash scanned the battlefront with narrowed eyes, taking everything in. “They’ve had to fall back several times,” he murmured, his voice low and grave. “The entire camp looks ready to get up and move at a word. I wonder how fast the Iron Realm is spreading.”

“Guess we’re about to find out,” Puck added, as the gnome emissary beckoned us forward and we descended into the camp.

The city of tents was much larger and sprawling up close, renewing my uneasiness for walking through a large group of fey, seeing their glowing, inhuman eyes follow my every move. Thankfully, we only had to walk through the Seelie camp to get to the large tent in the middle, though Puck and Ash stayed very close as we navigated the narrow streets. Elegant Summer knights, clad in armor stylized to look like thousands of overlapping leaves, watched us stonily, their eyes never leaving the Winter prince at my side. A pair of sylphs, razor dragonfly wings scraping together, scurried out of our way, staring at me with unabashed curiosity. A tethered griffin raised its head and hissed, flaring a colorful mane of feathers. One of its wings had been damaged, and it dragged along the ground as the griffin limped back and forth.

“This place smells like blood,” Ash murmured, his eyes darting about the camp. A swamp-green troll hobbled by, one arm burned black and oozing fluid, and I shuddered. “Looks like the war isn’t going well for us.”

“That’s what I like about you, prince. You’re always so cheerful.” Puck shook his head, gazing around the camp, and wrinkled his nose. “Although I will say, this place has seen better days. Does anyone feel like they’re about to hurl, or is it just me?”

“It is the iron.” Grimalkin picked his way over a puddle, then leaped atop a fallen tree, shaking out his paws. “This close to the false king’s realm, his influence is stronger than ever. It will be worse once you are actually within its borders.”

Puck snorted. “Doesn’t seem like it’s affecting you much, cat.”

“That is because I am smarter than you and prepare for these things.”

“Really? How would you prepare for me tossing you into a lake?”

“Puck,” I sighed, but at that moment, two Summer knights approached us, their faces haughty and arrogant even as they bowed. “Lady Meghan,” one said stiffly, after a venomous glare in Ash’s direction. “His majesty King Oberon will see you now.”

“You go ahead,” Grimalkin purred, sitting down on the log. “I have no business with Lord Pointy Ears today. I will not be joining you.”

“Where *will* you be, Grim?”

“Around.” And the cat vanished from sight. I shook my head and followed the knights, knowing Grimalkin would reappear when we needed

him.

We approached the large tent, ducking through the flaps as the guards pulled them aside, and entered a forest clearing draped in shadow. Giant trees stretched above us, tiny pin-pricks of light glimmering through their branches. Will-o'-the-wisps danced on the air, swarming around me, laughing, until I waved them away. An owl hooted close by, adding depth to the complex illusion surrounding us. If I looked at the trees from the corner of my eyes, not really focusing on them, I could see the cloth walls of the tent and the wooden poles holding them up. But I could also feel the heat from the humid summer night and smell the earthy scents of pine and cedar all around us. As far as illusions went, this one was near perfect.

On two thrones in the center of the clearing, as ancient and imposing as the forest itself, the rulers of the Summer Court waited for us.

Oberon was dressed for battle in a suit of mail that glittered emerald-gold under the illusionary stars. A dappled cape rippled behind him, and his antlered crown cast clawed shadows over the forest floor. Tall, lean, and elegant, his long silver hair braided down his back and a sword at his side, the Erlking watched us approach with alien green eyes that betrayed no emotion, even when they flickered to Ash and Puck, standing beside me, and dismissed them just as quickly.

Titania sat beside him, and her expression was much easier to read. The faery queen radiated hate, not just for me, but for the Winter prince, as well. She even stabbed a disdainful glare at Puck, but the brunt of her loathing was directed at me and Ash.

Seeing Titania sent a flare of anger through me. She was ultimately responsible for the whole situation with my real dad. It was her jealousy that led Puck to have Leanansidhe take him away, for fear the Summer Queen would hurt or kill him to spite Oberon. Titania saw my expression, and her lips curled into a nasty smirk, as if she'd discerned my thoughts. It made me very afraid for Paul; if Titania knew he was still alive, she might still hurt him to get to me.

"You have come," Oberon said, making the ground tremble. "Welcome home, daughter."

So I'm family again, now that you need something from me, is that it? I wanted to tell him not to call me daughter, that he had no right. I wanted to tell him that he couldn't just disown me and then call me back like nothing had happened. I didn't. I only nodded, gazing at the Erlking with what I

hoped was a confident expression. Forget bowing and scraping; I was done with that. If the faeries wanted something from me now, they were going to have to work for it.

Oberon raised an eyebrow at my silence, but that was the only outward sign of surprise. “I take it you found the terms of our contract acceptable?” he continued, his voice low and soothing, washing over me like thick syrup, making it suddenly hard to think. “We will raise your exile, and the exile of Robin Goodfellow, in return for your service in destroying the Iron King. I believe that is a fair bargain. Now…” Oberon turned to Puck, as if the matter were already settled. “Tell me what you have learned about the Iron fey in the time of your exile. You disobeyed my direct orders when you left Faery and went after the girl—it must have been very important.”

“Not so fast.” I shook off the glamour making my thoughts heavy and glared at Oberon. “I haven’t said ‘yes,’ yet.”

The Erlking stared at me in surprise. “You do not agree this is fair?” His voice rose at the end, sounding truly shocked that I would turn him down, or maybe that was just more faery glamour. “The offer is most generous, Meghan Chase. I am willing to overlook your blasphemous relationship with the Winter prince and give you a chance to come home.”

“I’m still considering.” I felt both Ash and Puck staring at me and hurried on. “Thing is, this isn’t my home. I already have one, waiting for me back in the mortal world. I already have a family, and I don’t need any of this.”

“Enough.” Titania rose and stabbed a glare of pure poison at me. “We do not need the half-breed, husband. Send her back to the mortal world she is so fond of.”

“Sit down. I wasn’t finished.”

The look on Titania’s face was as priceless as it was terrifying. I continued quickly before I lost my nerve or she turned me into a spider. “I’m willing to bargain with you, but there have to be a few add-ons. My family. Leave them out of this war. Leave them alone, period. And that’s *all* family members, including the man Leanansidhe stole when I was six.” I leveled a piercing glare at Titania, who stared back at me with murder in her eyes. “I want your word that you’ll let him be.”

“You dare tell me what to do, Meghan Chase?” The queen’s voice was soft, low, and held the ominous threat of an approaching storm. A season ago, I would’ve been afraid. Now, it only made me more determined.

“You need me,” I said, refusing to back down, feeling Ash and Puck press close. “I’m the only one who has a chance of stopping the false king. I’m the only one who can go into that hellhole and come out alive. Well, these are my terms—your word that my family will never see another faery for as long as they live, and that Ash and Puck will be able to return home once this is all over, like you promised they would. I want to hear it firsthand, right now. That’s my bargain for stopping the false king. Take it or leave it.”

The Erlking was silent a moment, his green eyes blank and mirrorlike, reflecting nothing. Then, he smiled, very faintly, and nodded once. “As you wish, daughter,” he mused, ignoring Titania as she whirled on him. “I will promise that no harm will befall your mortal family from *anyone* in my court. The Winter Court and the denizens of Tir Na Nog are not mine to order, but that is the best I can offer.”

Titania made a strangled noise of rage and stalked out of the clearing, leaving me victor of the field. I breathed deep to calm my pounding heart and turned to Oberon again.

“What about Ash and Puck?”

“Goodfellow is free to return to Faery as he pleases,” Oberon said with a brief glance at Puck. “Though I am certain he will do something else that will raise my ire in the next century or two.” Puck gave Oberon an innocent look. The Erlking did not seem appeased. “However,” he continued, turning back to me, “I am not the one who issued Prince Ash’s exile. You will have to take that up with the Winter Queen.”

“Where is she?”

“Meghan.” Ash moved closer, putting a hand on my arm. “You don’t have to confront Mab on my account.”

Ignoring Oberon, I turned, meeting his gaze. “You don’t care about going home?”

He paused, and I saw it in his eyes. He did care. Cut off from the Nevernever, he would eventually fade away into nothingness; we both knew that. But all he said was, “My only duty is to you now.”

“Mab is in the Winter camp,” Oberon said, after a long, piercing stare at Ash. Turning to me, he fixed me with a solemn gaze. “There is a war council tonight, daughter, between all the generals of Summer and Winter. It would do well for you to attend.”

I nodded, and the Erlking waved dismissal. “I will have someone show you your quarters soon,” he murmured. “Now, go.”

We’d started to retreat when Oberon’s voice stopped us halfway to the door. “Robin Goodfellow,” he said, making Puck wince, “you will remain here.”

“Damn,” Puck muttered. “That was quick. One minute back in the Nevernever and he’s already pulling my strings. You guys go ahead,” he said, waving us off. “I’ll meet you as soon as I can.” Rolling his eyes, Puck sauntered back toward Oberon, and we left the clearing.

“That was impressive,” Ash said quietly as we walked through the maze of tents. Summer fey parted for us, scurrying out of sight as we headed deeper into camp. “Oberon was throwing all the mind-altering glamour he could at you, trying to get you to agree to his terms quickly and not question him. Not only did you resist, you turned the contract to your advantage. Not many could have done that.”

“Really?” I thought back to the thick, sluggish feeling in the Erlking’s tent. “So that was Oberon trying to manipulate me again, huh? Maybe I could resist since I’m family. Half Oberon’s blood and all that.”

“Or you’re just incredibly stubborn,” Ash added, and I smacked his arm. He chuckled, taking my hand, and we continued on to Winter’s territory.

The Unseelie camp sat closer to the edge of the Iron Realm, and the tension here was definitely high. Winter knights stalked the camp’s borders, grim and dangerous in their black ice armor. Ogres glowered at me from their guard posts, drool dripping from their tusks, their eyes blank and menacing. A wyvern screeched from where it was tied to several stakes, flapping its wings and trying to yank free, snapping angrily at its handlers. I shivered, and Ash’s hand tightened on mine. We encountered no resistance, even among the many goblins, redcaps, and boggarts wandering the rows. The Unseelie gave us a wide berth, staring at Ash with a mixture of fascination, fear, and contempt—the wayward prince who’d turned his back on them all to be with the half-breed human. They never went further than to glare at me stonily, or shoot me a suggestive grin, but I was extremely glad for both the Winter prince and the steel blade at my side.

Just beyond the camp, the entrance to the Iron Realm loomed, metallic trees and twisted steel branches glinting in the dim light. I paused to stare

at it, feeling ice form in my stomach as I remembered what it was like; the burning wasteland of junk, the corrosive, flesh-eating rain sweeping over the land, Machina's black tower stabbing into the sky.

"Well, look who's back."

I turned to see a trio of Winter knights blocking our path, armored and dangerous looking, blue icicle shards stabbing up from their shoulders and helms.

"Faolan." Ash nodded, moving subtly in front of me.

"You've got some nerve to come back here, Ash," the middle knight said. His eyes glittered beneath his helm, glassy-blue and filled with loathing. "Mab was right to exile you. You and the half-breed Summer whore should have stayed in the mortal realm where you belong."

Ash drew his sword, sending a raspy screech across the field. The knights tensed and quickly backed up, hands dropping to their own blades. "Insult her again, and I will cut you into so many pieces they'll never find them all," Ash stated calmly. Faolan bristled and started forward, but Ash leveled the tip at him. "We don't have time to play with you now, so I'm going to ask you to move."

"You're not a prince any longer, Ash," Faolan growled, drawing his own blade. "You're just an exile, lower than goblin dung." He spat at our feet, the spittle crystallizing in the grass, turning to ice. "I think its time we taught you your place, *your highness*."

More knights appeared, drawing their swords and hemming us in. I counted five in all, and my heart hammered. As the circle started to close, I drew my sword and stood back-to-back with Ash, raising the blade so the light gleamed off its metal edge. "Stop right there," I told the knights, feigning a bravado I didn't feel. "This is *iron*, as I'm sure you can tell." I sliced at the air with a satisfying *whuff*, and pointed at my assailant. "You want to go through with this, go right ahead. I've been dying to see what this can do to fey armor."

"Meghan, get back," Ash muttered, his gaze never leaving his opponents. "You don't have to do this. They're not here for you."

"I'm not going to let you fight them by yourself," I hissed back.

A crowd was gathering, peering at us from the rows of tents, curious and eager to see a fight. A few goblins and redcaps shouted *"Fight!"* and *"Kill 'em!"* from the sidelines.

Bolstered by the mob and the cries for blood, Faolan grinned and raised his sword. “Don’t worry, Ash,” he smiled. “We won’t rough your human up *too* badly. Unfortunately, I can’t say the same for you. Attack!”

The knights charged. Balanced on the balls of my feet, as Ash had taught me, I focused on the two coming in from behind and let instinct take over. The knights were sneering as they approached, their stances loose and sloppy. Obviously, they didn’t think I was much of a threat. One sword swept up in a lazy arc toward my head, and I raised my own blade to parry, knocking it aside. I saw the knight’s look of shock that I had blocked his attack, and saw an opening. Reacting solely on instinct, my arm shot out, faster than I thought it could, and the tip of my sword pierced his armored thigh.

The knight’s scream snapped me out of my fighter’s trance, and the stench of burned flesh tainted the air, making my stomach churn. I had fully expected him to leap aside or parry, as Ash always did. Instead, I watched my opponent stagger away, clutching his leg and howling, and my rhythm stuttered to a halt. Giving me a furious glare, the other knight raised a huge blue greatsword and lunged with a snarl. I backed away frantically, barely avoiding him. He was pissed now, coming at me fast, and fear churned my insides.

“Meghan! Focus!”

Ash’s voice snapped me out of my terrified daze, and I instinctively jerked to attention, raising my sword. “Remember what I taught you,” he growled somewhere to my left, clipped and breathless from fighting his own assailants. “This is no different.”

The knight attacked savagely, teeth bared in a fearsome snarl, his greatsword sweeping through the air in a lethal arch. *His weapon*, I thought, dodging away. *It’s heavier than mine, slowing him down. Always use your enemy’s weakness to your advantage.* I danced around him, keeping just out of reach, watching him pant and grit his teeth as he followed, swatting at me like a pesky fly.

With a frustrated bellow, the knight slammed the edge of his sword into the earth, and a spray of grit and icy shards flew at my face. I turned quickly to shield my eyes, feeling the ice sting my cheek and exposed skin, and heard the knight lunge for me. On instinct, I ducked, nearly going to my knees, feeling the blade whoosh overhead. Coming up blind, I let my sword arm lead me forward and stabbed with all my might.

A jarring impact rocked my shoulder back, and the knight screamed. Glancing up, I found myself standing in front of the knight, the iron blade jammed into his stomach.

The knight choked and dropped his sword, clutching his middle as he staggered back, the sudden stench of burned flesh rising on the breeze. Face tight with fury and pain, the knight turned and vanished into the crowd, and I breathed a ragged sigh.

Shaking with adrenaline, I looked around for Ash and saw him leveling his sword at the throat of a kneeling Faolan. The other knights sprawled nearby, groaning.

"Are we done here?" Ash said softly, and Faolan, eyes blazing with hate, nodded. Ash let him up, and the knights limped off, to the jeers and taunts of the Winter fey.

Sheathing his sword, Ash turned to me. I was still shaking with adrenaline, replaying every moment of the fight in my head. It didn't seem quite real, like it happened to someone else, but the thrill coursing through my veins said different.

"Did you see that?" I grinned at Ash, my voice trembling with excitement and nerves. "I did it. I actually won!"

"Indeed," mused a familiar, terrifying voice, one that turned my blood to ice and made the hairs on my neck stand up. "It was *quite* amusing. I do believe I'm going to need some new guards, if they can't even defeat one scrawny half-blood."

It's amazing how quickly a bloodthirsty mob can clear out, but the Queen of the Winter Fey had that effect on people. In seconds, the crowd had fled, fading back into the camp until it was just me and Ash in the middle of the path. The temperature dropped sharply, and frost spread over the blades of grass at our feet, which could mean only one thing. A few yards away, flanked by two unsmiling knights, Queen Mab watched us with the stillness of a glacier.

As usual, the Winter Queen was stunning in a long battlegown of black and red, her ebony hair a dark cloud behind her. I shivered and pressed closer to Ash as she raised one pure-white hand and beckoned us forward. The Unseelie monarch was as unpredictably dangerous as she was beautiful, prone to trapping living creatures in ice or freezing the blood in their veins, making them die slowly and in agony. I'd already felt the brunt of her legendary temper, and I had no desire to do so again.

“Ash,” Mab crooned, paying no attention to me. “I heard the rumors that you were back. Have you had enough of the mortal world yet? Are you ready to come home?”

Ash’s face was shut into that blank, empty mask, his eyes cold and expressionless. A self-defense mechanism, I recognized, to shield himself from the cruelty of the Winter Court. The Unseelie preyed on the weak, and emotions were considered a weakness here. “No, my Queen,” he said, quiet but unafraid. “I’m no longer yours to command. My service to the Winter Court ended last night.”

Silence for a few heartbeats.

“You.” Mab’s depthless black eyes shifted to me, then back to Ash. “You became her knight, didn’t you? You swore the oath.” She shook her head in disbelief and horror. “Foolish, foolish boy,” she whispered. “You are truly dead to me now.”

Fearing she might turn and walk away, I eased forward. “You’ll still lift his exile, though, won’t you?” I asked, and Mab’s gaze snapped to me. “When this is over, when we take care of the false king, Ash is still free to return to the Nevernever, right?”

“He won’t,” Mab said in a lethally calm voice, and goose bumps rose on my arms from the sudden chill. “Even if I raise his exile, he’ll stay in the mortal realm with you, because you were foolish enough to ask for that oath. You’ve damned him far worse than I ever could.”

My stomach twisted, but I took a deep breath and continued to speak firmly. “I still want your word, Queen Mab. Please. When this is done, Ash is free to return to Tir Na Nog if he chooses to.”

Mab stared at me, long enough for sweat to trickle down my back, then gave us both a cold, humorless smile. “Why not? You are both going to die anyway, so I don’t see how it will matter.” She sighed. “Very well, Meghan Chase. Ash is free to return home if he wants, though he said it himself—his service to the Unseelie Court is done. His oath to you will destroy him faster than anything else.”

And without waiting for a reply, the Unseelie Queen whirled and stalked away from us. Though I couldn’t see her face as she left, I was almost sure she was crying.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
THE FAERY WAR COUNCIL

A swollen crimson moon hovered over the camp that night, rust-red and ominous, bathing everything in an eerie, bloody tint. Snow flecks drifted from a nearly clear sky, rusty flakes dancing on the wind, like the moon itself was tainted and corroding away.

I left my tent, which was small and musty and lacked an illusionary forest clearing, to find Ash and Puck waiting for me on the other side of the flaps. The eerie red light outlined their sharp, angular features, making them seem more inhuman than before, their eyes glowing in the shadows. Behind them, the camp was quiet; nothing moved beneath the harsh red moon, and the city of tents resembled a ghost town.

"They've called for you," Ash said solemnly.

I nodded. "Then let's not keep them waiting."

Oberon's tent loomed above the others, twin banners flapping limply in the breeze. A fine dusting of snow lay on the ground, marred by boots and clawed feet and hooves, all heading toward the center of the camp. Flickering yellow light spilled from the cracks in the tent flaps, and I pushed my way inside.

The forest clearing was still there, but this time a massive stone table sat in the middle, surrounded by faeries in armor. Oberon and Mab stood at the head, imposing and grim, flanked by several sidhe gentry. A huge troll, ram horns curling through his bony helmet, stood quietly with his arms folded, watching the proceedings, while a centaur argued with a goblin chief, both of them stabbing fingers at the map on the table. An enormous oakman, gnarled and twisted, crouched low to hear the voices at his feet, his weathered face impassive.

"I'm warning you," the centaur said, the muscles in his flank quivering with rage, "if your scouts are going to set traps at the edge of the wasteland, let me know so *my* scouts don't walk right into them! I've had two break their legs stepping into a pit, and another nearly die from one of your poison darts."

The goblin chief snickered. “Ain’t my fault yer scouts don’t watch where they tromp,” he sneered, baring a mouthful of crooked fangs. “Besides, what’re yer scouts doin’ so close to our camp, hmm? Stealin’ secrets, I’d wager. Jealous that we’ve always been the better trackers, I bet.”

“Enough.” Oberon broke in before the centaur could leap across the table and strangle the goblin. “We are not here to fight each other. I wished only to know what your scouts have reported, not the silent war between them.”

The centaur sighed and gave the goblin a murderous look. “It is as the goblins say, my lord,” he said, turning to Oberon. “The skirmishes we have fought with the Iron abominations seem to be advance units. They are testing us, probing our weaknesses, knowing we cannot follow them into the Iron Realm. We have yet to see the full army. Or the Iron King.”

“Sire,” said one of the sidhe generals, bowing to Oberon, “what if this is a ruse? What if the Iron King intends to attack elsewhere? We might be better served defending Arcadia and the Summer Court than waiting at the edge of the wyldwood.”

“No.” It was Mab who spoke then, cold and unyielding. “If you leave to return to your home court, we will be lost. If the Iron King taints the wyldwood, Summer and Winter will soon follow. We cannot retreat to our homes. We must hold the line here.”

“Agreed,” said Oberon in a voice that was final. “Summer will not retreat from this. The only way to protect Arcadia, and all of the Nevernever, is to stop the advance here. Kruxas,” he said, looking at the troll. “Where are your forces? Are they on their way?”

“Yes, your majesty,” growled the troll, nodding his huge head. “They will be here in three days, barring any complications.”

“And what of the Ancient Ones?” Mab looked at the general who had spoken. “This is their world, even if they slumber through it. Have the dragons heeded our call to arms?”

“We do not know the state of the few remaining Ancients, your majesty.” The general bowed his head. “Thus far, we have only been able to find one, and we are unsure if she will help us. As for the rest, they either sleep still or have retreated deep into the earth to wait this out.”

Oberon nodded. “Then we will do without them.”

“Forgive me, your majesty.” It was the centaur who spoke again, giving Oberon a pleading look. “But how do we stop the Iron King if he refuses to engage us? He still hides within his poisoned land, while we waste lives and resources waiting for him. We cannot sit here forever, while the Iron abominations pick us off one by one.”

“No,” said Oberon, and looked directly at me. “We cannot.”

All eyes turned to me. I swallowed and resisted the urge to shrink back as Puck let out a puff of breath and gave me a wry glance. “Well, that’s our cue.”

“Meghan Chase has agreed to go into the wasteland and find the Iron King,” Oberon said as I edged up to the table, followed by Ash and Puck. Curious, disbelieving, and disdainful stares followed me. “Her half-human blood will protect her from the poison of the realm, and without an army she has the chance to slip through unnoticed.” Oberon’s eyes narrowed, and he stabbed a finger into the map. “While she is there, we must hold this position at all costs. We must give her the time she needs to discover the location of the Iron King and kill him.”

My gut clenched, and my throat felt dry. I really didn’t want to have to kill again. I still had nightmares about sticking an arrow through the chest of the last Iron King. But I’d given my word, and everyone was counting on me. If I wanted to see my family again, we had to end this now.

“Your majesty.” It was a Winter sidhe who spoke this time, a tall warrior in icy armor, his white hair braided down his back. “Forgive me, sire. But are we really entrusting the safety of the realm, the entire Nevernever to this…half-breed? This *exile* who flouts the laws of both courts?” He shot me a hostile glare, his eyes glittering blue. “She is not one of us. She will never be one of us. Why should she care what happens to the Nevernever? Why should we even trust her?”

“She is my daughter.” Oberon’s voice was calm, but had the tremor of an approaching earthquake. “And you do not need to trust her. You need only to obey.”

“But he raises a good point, Erlking,” Mab said, smiling at me in a way that made my skin crawl. “What are your plans, half-breed? How do you expect to find the Iron King, and if you do, how do you expect to stop him?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted softly, and disgusted growls went around the table. “I don’t know where he is. But I will find him, I promise you

that. I took down one Iron King—you'll just have to trust I can do it again."

"You are asking a great deal of us, half-breed," said another faery, a Summer knight this time, regarding me with a dubious, acid-green gaze. "I cannot say I like this plan of yours, such as it is."

"You don't have to like it," I said, facing them all. "And you don't have to trust me. But it seems to me that I'm the best chance you've got at stopping the false king. I don't see any of *you* volunteering to go into the Iron Realm. If anyone else has a better idea, I'd love to hear it."

Silence for a long moment, broken only by a faint snicker from Puck. Angry, sullen glares were leveled my way, but no one rose to challenge me. Oberon's face was expressionless, but Mab watched me with a cold, frightening gaze.

"You are correct, Erlking," she said at last, turning to Oberon. "Time is of the essence. We will send the half-breed into the wasteland to slay the abomination called the Iron King. If she succeeds, the war will be ours. If she dies—" Mab broke off to look at me, her perfect red lips curling into a smile "—we lose nothing."

Oberon nodded, still expressionless. "I would not send you alone unless it was of gravest circumstances, daughter," he continued. "I know I ask much of you, but you have surprised me before. I only pray you surprise me again."

"She won't be alone," Ash said softly, startling everyone. The prince moved beside me to face the war council, his face and voice firm. "Goodfellow and I are going with her."

The Erlking gazed at him. "I thought as much, knight," he mused. "And I admire your loyalty, though I fear it will destroy you in the end. But…do what you must. We will not stop you."

"I still think you a fool, boy," Mab said, turning her cold glare on her youngest son. "Were it up to me, I would have torn out your throat to keep you from speaking that oath. But if you insist upon going with the girl, the Unseelie Court has something that might help."

I blinked in surprise, and Oberon turned to Mab, raising an eyebrow. Obviously, this was news to him, too. But the Winter Queen ignored him, her black eyes shifting to me, dark and feral.

"Does this surprise you, half-breed?" She sniffed in disdain. "Believe what you will, I have no desire to see my last son dead. If Ash insists on

following you into the Iron Realm again, he will need something that will protect him from the poison of that place. My smiths have been working on a charm that could possibly shield the bearer from the Iron glamour. They tell me it is almost ready."

My heart leaped. "What is it?"

Mab smiled, cold and brittle, and turned to the watching fey. "Leave," she hissed. "All of you, except the girl and her protectors, get out."

The Winter faeries straightened immediately and left, exiting the clearing without a backward glance. The Summer knights looked questioningly at Oberon, who dismissed them with a curt nod. Reluctantly, they drew back, bowed to their king, and followed the Winter fey out of the tent, leaving us alone with the rulers of Faery.

Oberon gave Mab a level stare. "Hiding things from the Summer Court, Lady Mab?"

"Do not take that tone with me, Lord Oberon." Mab narrowed her eyes at him. "You would do the same, as well. I look out for my own, no others." She raised her hands and clapped once. "Heinzelmann, bring in the abomination."

The grass rustled as three small men with lizardlike features melted from the shadows and padded up to the table. Smaller than dwarves, they barely came up to my knee, but they weren't gnomes or brownies or goblins. I shot a questioning look at Ash, and he grimaced.

"Kobolds," he said. "They're the smiths for the Unseelie Court."

The kobolds carried a cage between them, made of inter-locking branches that glowed with Summer glamour, trapping whatever was inside. Peering out at us, hissing and snarling and shaking the bars of its cage, was a gremlin.

I couldn't help but cringe when I saw the creature. Gremlins were Iron faeries, but so chaotic and wild, not even the other Iron fey wanted them around. They lived in machines and computers and would often congregate in huge swarms, usually where they could do the most damage. They were spindly, ugly little creatures, sort of a cross between a naked monkey and a wingless bat, with long arms, flared-out ears, and razor-sharp teeth that glowed neon-blue when they smiled.

I understood now why Mab wanted everyone else gone. The gremlin might not have survived its trek to the table, as one or more knights would probably have cut it down as soon as they saw it. Oberon watched the

hissing faery with the look of someone observing a particularly disgusting insect, but did nothing more than blink.

The kobolds heaved the cage onto the table, where the gremlin snarled and spat at us, flitting from one side of the container to the next. The largest kobold, a yellow-eyed creature with bushy hair, grinned, flicking his tongue like a lizard. “It isss ready, Queen Mab,” he hissed. “Would you like to perform the ritual?”

Mab’s smile was thoroughly frightening. “Give me the amulet, Heinzelmann.”

The kobold handed her something that flashed briefly in the dim light. Still smiling, the Winter Queen turned back to the gremlin, watching it with a predatory gleam in her eyes. The gremlin snarled at her. Raising her fist, the queen began chanting, words I didn’t understand, words that rippled with power, swirling around her like a vortex. I felt a pull on the inside, as if my soul was straining to leave my body and fly into that whirlwind. I gasped and felt Ash take my hand, squeezing it tightly as if he feared I would fly away, as well.

The gremlin arched its back, mouth gaping, and gave a piercing wail. I saw a dark, ragged wisp, like a dirty cloud, rise up from the gremlin’s mouth and get pulled into the vortex. Mab continued to chant, and like a tornado being sucked down a drain, the vortex vanished into whatever she held in her hand. The gremlin collapsed, twitching, sparks jumping off its body to fizzle on the stone. With a final shudder, it was still.

My mouth was dry as Mab turned back to us, a triumphant look on her face. “What did you do to it?” I demanded hoarsely.

Mab raised her hand. An amulet dangled by a thin silver chain, flashing like a drop of water in the sun. It was a tiny thing, shaped like a teardrop, held in place by prongs of ice. The teardrop was as clear as glass, and I could see something writhing like smoke on the inside.

“We have found a way to trap the Iron creature’s life essence,” Mab purred, sounding horribly pleased with herself. “If the amulet works, it will draw the Iron glamour from the wearer into itself, cleansing and protecting him from the poison. You will even be able to *touch* iron without being burned. Severely, anyway.” She shrugged. “At least, that is what my smiths tell me. It has not been tested yet.”

“And was that the only one?” Ash nodded to the lifeless gremlin, his face uncertain. The creature seemed even smaller in death than in life, as

fragile as a pile of twigs. Mab gave a cruel laugh, shaking her head.

"Oh no, my dear." She let the amulet dangle, spinning slowly on its chain. "Many, many abominations went into the making of this charm. Which is why we could not hand them out to just anyone. Capturing the creatures alive proved…difficult."

"And—" I stared at the writhing mist within the glass, feeling faintly ill "—you have to *kill* them to make it work?"

"This is *war,* human." Mab's voice was cold and remorseless. "It is either kill or be destroyed ourselves." The queen sniffed, gazing contemptuously at the twisted body of the gremlin. "The Iron fey are corrupting our home and poisoning our people. I think this fair exchange, don't you?"

I wasn't sure about that, but Puck cleared his throat, drawing our attention. "Hate to sound greedy and all," he said, "but is ice-boy the only one who gets a shiny piece of jewelry? Seeing as there are three of us going into the Iron Realm."

Mab gave him an icy glare. "No, Robin Goodfellow," she said, making Puck's name sound like a curse. "The creature that showed us how to make these insisted you get one, too." She gestured, and Heinzelmann the kobold approached Puck with a grin, handing out another amulet on a chain. This one had vines curled around the glass instead of ice, but they were otherwise identical. Puck grinned as he looped it around his neck, giving Mab a slight bow, which she ignored.

Beckoning Ash forward, Mab draped the amulet around his neck as he bowed. "This is the best we can do for you," she said as Ash straightened, and for a moment, the Winter Queen looked almost regretful, staring at her son. "If you cannot defeat the Iron King, then we are all lost."

"We won't fail," Ash said softly, and Mab placed a palm on his cheek, gazing at him like she would not see him again.

"One last thing," she added as Ash stepped back. "The magic in the amulet is not permanent. It will weaken and corrode over time, and eventually it will shatter altogether. The smiths also tell me that any use of glamour will hasten the charm's destruction, as will direct contact with anything made of iron. How long that will take, they are not sure. But they do agree on one thing—it will not last forever. Once you enter the Iron Realm, you have a limited time to find your target and kill him. So, I would hurry if I were you, Meghan Chase."

Oh, of course, I thought, as my gut twisted and sank down to my toes. *This impossible situation also comes with a time limit. No pressure.*

"Queen Mab!"

The shout, high-pitched and gravelly, echoed from beyond the clearing, and a moment later a leafy bush scurried into the tent and danced around at Mab's feet. It took me a moment to realize it was a goblin with leaves and twigs glued to its clothes, making it blend perfectly into a forest environment.

"Queen Mab!" it rasped. "Iron fey! Snigg spotted many Iron fey camped at the edge of the wasteland! Sound alarm! Ready weapons! Run, run!"

Mab swooped down and in a blindingly quick gesture, grabbed the frantic goblin by the throat, lifting it into the air.

"How many of them are there?" she asked softly, as the goblin choked and kicked weakly in her grip, his leafy camouflage bobbing.

"Um." The goblin gave a last twitch and calmed down. "Few hundred?" it croaked. "Many lights, many creatures. Snigg didn't get a good look, so sorry."

"And are they approaching, or stationary?" Mab continued in what would have been a calm, reasonable voice, if the glassy look in her eyes hadn't betrayed her scariness. "Do we have time to prepare, or are they right at our door?"

"Few miles out, your majesty. Snigg ran all the way back when he saw them, but they had camped, camped for the night. Snigg's guess is they'll attack at dawn."

"So we have a little time, at least." Mab tossed away the goblin like she was throwing out an empty soda can. "Go inform our forces that battle is nigh. Tell the generals to attend me, to discuss our strategy for the morning. Go!"

The goblin fled, a leafy bush scrambling out of the tent. Mab whirled on Oberon. "It is terribly convenient," she hissed, scowling, "for your daughter to appear and we are immediately attacked. It is almost as if they are coming for her."

Sheer black fright washed through me. One or two opponents I could handle, but not an entire army. "What can I do?" I asked, trying to keep the tremor from my voice. "Do you want me to leave now?"

Oberon shook his head. “Not tonight,” he said firmly. “The enemy is at our doorstep, and you could walk straight into their jaws.”

“I could sneak around—”

“No, Meghan Chase. I will not risk your discovery. Too much is at stake for you to be captured and killed. We will fight them tomorrow and when they are defeated, you will have a clear path into the Iron Realm.”

“But—”

“I will not argue with you, daughter.” Oberon turned and fixed me with unyielding green eyes, his voice going deep and terrible. “You will remain here, where we can protect you, until the battle is won. I am still king, and that is my final word on the matter.”

He glared at me, and I didn’t protest. Despite our family ties, he was still Lord of the Summer Fey; it would be dangerous to push him any further. Mab sniffed, shaking her head disapprovingly. “Very well, Erlking,” she said, drawing herself up. “I must ready my troops for the battle. Excuse me.”

With a last chilly smile at me, the Queen of the Winter Fey left the clearing. I watched her swoop out of the tent, and turned back to Oberon. “So, what now?”

“Now,” Oberon replied, “we make ready for war.”

CHAPTER TWELVE
THE TRAITOR KNIGHT

The camp celebrated that night. Once word of the impending attack got out, excitement and anticipation spread like wildfire, until it could no longer be contained to a few stuffy tents. Faeries swarmed the streets like revelers after a hockey game, drudging up food and alcohol and other, more questionable things. Drums and pipes, primal and dark, echoed over the wind, pounding out a savage rhythm. On each side of the camp, massive bonfires were lit, roaring up like phoenixes in the night, as the armies of Summer and Winter danced and drank and sang the night away.

I hung back from the main fires, avoiding the dancing and the drinking and the other acts going on in the shadows. From where I stood, a mug of black tea warming my hands, I could see both Summer and Winter fires and the dark silhouettes dancing around them. On the Unseelie side, goblins and redcaps chanted dark, vulgar battle songs, usually about blood and meat and body parts, while dryads and tree nymphs swayed a mesmerizing dance around the Seelie camp, moving like branches in the wind. A sylph fluttered by, chased by a satyr, and an ogre hefted a whole ale keg above his open mouth, bathing his face in dark liquor.

"You wouldn't think there's a fight tomorrow," I muttered to Ash, who was leaning against a tree, a green bottle held lightly between two fingers. Every so often, he'd raise the glass and take a single swallow from the neck, but I knew better than to ask him to share. Faery wine is potent stuff, and I had no desire to spend the rest of the night as a hedgehog, or holding a conversation with giant pink rabbits. "Isn't it traditional to celebrate *after* you win?"

"And what if there is no tomorrow?" Ash turned his gaze toward the Unseelie bonfire, where the goblins were singing, something about fingers and meat cleavers. "Many of them won't live to see another dawn. And once we die, there is nothing left. No existence beyond this one." Though his voice was matter-of-fact, a shadow hovered in his eyes. He took a swig of wine and glanced at me, one corner of his lip turned up. "I think you

mortals have a phrase—eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die?"

"Oh, that's not morbid at all, Ash."

Before he could reply, something stumbled into our little space, tripped, and went sprawling at my feet. It was Puck, his shirt off, his red hair in disarray. He grinned up at me, a crown of daisies woven through his hair, a bottle clutched in one hand. A group of nymphs crowded around him a second later, giggling. I drew back as they swarmed all over him.

"Oh, hey, princess!" Puck waved inanely as the nymphs pulled him to his feet, still giggling. His hair gleamed, his eyes gleamed, and I barely recognized him. "Wanna play ride the phouka with us?"

"Um. No thanks, Puck."

"Suit yourself. But you only live once, princess." And Puck let himself be pulled away by the nymphs, vanishing into the crowd by the fire. Ash shook his head and took a swig from his bottle. I stared after them, not knowing what to feel.

"That's a side of him I haven't seen before," I muttered at last, hunching my shoulders against the wind. Ash chuckled.

"Then you don't know Goodfellow as well as you think." The dark faery pushed himself off the tree and came to stand beside me, lightly touching my shoulder. "Try to get some rest. The revel will only get wilder as the night goes on, and you might not want to see what happens when faeries get extremely drunk. Besides, you'll want at least a few hours of sleep before the battle tomorrow."

I shivered as I rose, my stomach clenching as I thought of the impending war. "Will I have to fight, too?" I asked as we fell into step back toward my tent. Ash sighed.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," he said, almost to himself. "And I don't think Oberon will want you in the midst of it, either. You're too important to risk being killed."

I was relieved, but at the same time, guilt gnawed at me. I was tired of people dying while I stood by, helpless. Maybe it was time I started fighting my own battles.

We reached my tent and I hesitated, my heart suddenly fluttering like crazy. I could feel his presence at my back, quiet and strong, making my skin tingle. The darkness beyond the flaps beckoned invitingly, and words danced on the tip of my tongue, held back by nervousness and fear.

Just spit it out, Meghan. Ask him to stay with you tonight. What's the worst that could happen? He says no? I cringed inwardly with embarrassment. *Okay, that would suck. But would he really refuse? You know he loves you. What are you waiting for?*

I took a breath. "Ash…um…"

"Prince Ash!" A Winter knight marched through the line of tents and bowed when he reached us. I wanted to kick him, but Ash looked amused.

"So, I'm a prince again, am I?" he mused softly. "Very well. What do you want, Deylin?"

"Queen Mab has requested your presence, your highness," the knight continued, ignoring me completely. "She wishes you to meet her in her tent on the Winter side of the camp. I will remain here and guard the Summer princess until—"

"I no longer answer to Queen Mab," Ash said, and the knight gaped at him. "If my lady wishes me to go, I will honor her request. If she does not, then I would ask you to send the queen my apologies."

The Winter knight continued to look dumbstruck, but Ash turned to me, serious and formal, though I could sense a secret triumph deep within. "If you want me to stay, you only have to say the word," he stated quietly. "Or I can go see what Mab wants. Your will is my command."

I was tempted, so very tempted, to ask him to stay. I wanted to pull him into my tent and make us both forget about the war and the courts and the looming battle, just for a night. But Mab would be even more furious, and I really didn't want to piss off the Winter Queen any more than I already had.

"No," I sighed. "Go see what Mab wants. I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, and he drew back. "I'll be close," he said. "And Deylin will be right outside. You can trust him, but if you need me, just call."

"I will," I replied, and watched him walk away until he disappeared into the shadows, my skin buzzing with thwarted desire. Deylin gave me a jerky bow and turned away, positioning himself in front of my tent. Sighing, I ducked inside and flopped down on my bed, covering my heated face with a pillow. My head swirled with forbidden thoughts and feelings, making it impossible to relax. For a long time, I could think only of a certain dark knight, and when I finally dropped off to sleep, he continued to invade my dreams.

SOMETHING CLAMPED DOWN over my mouth in the darkness, muffling my startled yelp. I jerked, but found myself pinned on my back, my arms crushed under the body straddling my waist. An armored knight loomed over me, a full helm and visor concealing his face.

"Shhhhhh." The knight pressed a finger to his lips through the helm. I could feel him smiling behind the visor. "Relax, your highness. This will be much easier if you don't fight."

I bucked desperately, but the gauntlet over my mouth slammed me back, squeezing until tears formed in my eyes. The knight sighed. "I see you want to do this the hard way."

The gauntlet grew icy cold on my skin, burning like fire. I thrashed and kicked, but couldn't dislodge the weight on my chest or the hand over my face. Ice formed on my skin, spreading over my cheeks and jaw, freezing my lips shut. The knight chuckled and removed his hand, leaving me panting through my nose against the ice gag. My face felt like it had been splashed with acid, vicious cold eating into my bones.

"That's better." The knight sat back, settling his weight more fully, and gazed down at me. "Wouldn't want dear Ash to come running just yet, would we?"

I jerked in recognition. I knew that smug, arrogant voice. The knight saw my reaction and chuckled.

Reaching to his helm, he flipped up the visor, confirming my suspicions. My heart pounded, and I shivered violently, struggling to control my fear.

"Miss me, princess?" Rowan smiled, his diamond-blue eyes gleaming in the darkness, and I would've gasped in revulsion if I could. Ash's older brother looked different now; his once-handsome, pointed face resembled a crater of raw flesh and ugly burns. Open, gaping wounds seeped fluid down his cheeks, and his nose had fallen off, leaving ugly holes behind. He reminded me of a grinning skull, glassy eyes sunk deep into his head, bright with pain and madness.

"Do I disgust you?" he whispered, as I fought the urge to gag. "This is merely a trial, princess, my rite of passage. The iron burns away the weak, useless flesh, until I am reborn as one of them. I must merely endure the pain until I am complete. When the Iron King takes over the Nevernever, I will be the only one of the oldbloods to withstand the change."

I shook my head, wanting to tell him he was wrong, that there was no rite of passage, that the false king was merely using him like all the others. But of course, I couldn't speak through the ice, and Rowan suddenly pulled a dagger, the onyx blade thin and serrated like the edges of a shark's tooth.

"The Iron King wants to do the honors himself," he whispered, "but all you have to be is slightly alive when you get there. I think I'll cut off a few fingers and leave them behind for Ash to find before we go. What do you say, your highness?"

He shifted his weight to free one of my arms, grabbed my wrist, and pinned it to the ground despite my wild thrashing. "Oh, keep squirming, princess," he cooed. "It makes this so erotic." Picking up the knife, he positioned it above my hand, choosing a finger.

I took a deep breath to calm my panic and tried to think. My sword was close, but I couldn't move my arm. Using glamour would either exhaust or sicken me, but I had no choice this time. As Rowan prodded my exposed fingers with the tip of the knife, drawing tiny blood drops and extending the torment, I focused on the hilt.

Wood is wood. Puck's voice echoed in my mind. *Be it a dead tree, the side of a ship, a wooden crossbow or a simple broom handle, Summer magic can make it come alive again, if only for a moment. Concentrate.*

A surge of glamour, and gleaming thorns erupted from the hilt, stabbing through the gauntlet and into Rowan's flesh. The room swirled as dizziness came almost immediately, and I broke the connection as Rowan howled, jerking back and releasing my arm. Exactly as I hoped. With an internal yell, I surged up, ignoring the clinging nausea, and thrust my freed hand under his visor, clawing at his hideous, burned face.

This time, Rowan's scream shook the cloth walls. Dropping the knife, he went to cover his face and I shoved him off with all my might. Scrambling upright, I whirled and drew my sword with one hand, clawing at my frozen face with the other. Ice broke off in chunks, feeling like they took flaps of skin with them. I blinked away tears as Rowan got to his feet, his expression murderous.

"You really think you're going to beat me?" Drawing his sword, which was ice-blue and serrated like the knife, Rowan stepped forward. Blood ran down the side of his face, and one eye was squeezed shut. "Why didn't you run, princess?" he mused. "Run to Ash and your father—I can't chase you through the whole camp. You should have run."

I ripped the last of the ice from my lips and spat on the ground between us, tasting blood. “I’m through with running,” I said, watching his one good eye narrow. “And I’m not about to let you stab me in the back, either. I want you to take a message to the false king.”

Rowan smiled, teeth shining like fangs in his ravaged face, and eased closer. I held my ground, sinking into a defensive stance like Ash taught me. I was still afraid, because I’d seen Rowan fight Ash before, and I knew he was far better than me. But anger overshadowed fear now, and I pointed at Rowan with my sword. “You tell the false king he doesn’t have to send anyone to get me,” I said in the firmest voice I could manage. “I’m coming for him. I’m coming for him, and when I find him, I’m going to kill him.”

With a shock, I realized that I really meant it. It was either him or my family now, both mortal and faery. For everyone else to live, the false king had to die. As Grim once prophesized, I had become an assassin of the courts.

Rowan sneered, unimpressed. “I’ll be sure to tell him, princess,” he mocked. “But don’t think you’re getting away from me unscathed.” He took another step forward, and I eased backward, toward the tent flaps. “I think I’ll take an ear for a trophy, just to show the king that I didn’t fail him.”

He lunged, a blindingly quick move that took me by surprise. I jerked back, sweeping my blade up to parry, managing to deflect his sword, but I wasn’t quite fast enough. The tip grazed my skin, slicing a line of fire across my cheek. I stumbled back, tripped over something in the doorway, and fell backward out of the tent.

Deylin’s lifeless, frozen body stared up at me, his eyes wide with shock. As I watched, the faery’s body rippled, then dissolved like an ice cube in the microwave, until nothing was left but a puddle of water in the dirt.

Cursing, I scrambled to my feet, backing away from the opening. My cheek burned, and I could feel something warm trickling down my face. “Ash!” I yelled, gazing around wildly. “Puck! It’s Rowan! Rowan is here!”

The camp was dark, silent. Faeries lay passed out on the ground, snoring where they’d fallen, mugs and bottles scattered everywhere. Smoke curled lazily into the air from charred timbers, embers flickering weakly in the darkness.

Rowan exited the tent, pushing aside the flaps and brazenly stepping into the open, sneering all the while. Still smiling, he put two fingers to his mouth and blew out a piercing whistle that carried over the trees. “Running away now, princess?” he asked, as faeries began to groan and stir, blinking and confused. “How do you expect to kill the Iron King when you can’t even get past his knight?”

“I’ll find a way,” I told him, keeping my sword pointed at his chest. “I did before.”

Rowan chuckled. “We’ll look forward to it then, princess. Say hello to Ash for me.”

“Rowan!”

Ash’s shout of fury echoed through the camp. The dark prince appeared beside me from nowhere, anger swirling around him in a black-and-red cloud. The look in his eyes when he faced his brother was terrifying—that blank, glassy killing stare that promised no mercy.

Rowan laughed and threw up an arm.

An answering bellow rang overhead, and two tons of scaly brown wyvern crashed into our midst, roaring and lashing out with its tail. I saw the gleaming, poisoned barb coming toward me and slashed wildly with my blade, cutting through the tip. The barb and the end of its tail fell, writhing, in the dirt, though the force of the blow knocked me off my feet. In the same second, Ash’s sword lashed out, slicing across one bulbous yellow eye.

The wyvern screeched and drew back, and in one swift motion, Rowan leaped atop the scaly neck as it lunged skyward, beating the air with tattered, leathery wings. Rising above our heads, the huge lizard streaked toward the edge of the trees and vanished through the gap that led to the Iron Realm, Rowan’s mocking laughter echoing in its wake.

Panting, Ash sheathed his sword and helped me to my feet. “Meghan, are you all right?” he asked, his gaze flicking over my face, resting on my cut cheek. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner. Mab wanted a full report from the time we were exiled. What happened?”

I winced. Talking hurt now; my lips were raw and bloody, and the left side of my face felt like someone had pressed it to a lit stove. “He showed up in my tent bragging that he was going to become an Iron faery, and that the false king was waiting for me. He was going to cut off my fingers and leave them for you to find,” I continued, looking at Ash, seeing his eyes

narrow, “but that was before I clawed his eyes out. Ow.” I gingerly probed my cheek, grimacing as my fingers came away stained with blood. “Bastard.”

“I will kill him,” Ash muttered in that soft, scary voice. It sounded like a promise, though he didn’t say the words. The murderous look in his eyes spoke loud enough.

“Princess!” Puck appeared then, still shirtless, his hair looking like a vulture had nested in it. “What happened? Was that *Rowan* that just beat the hell out of here? What’s going on?”

I scowled at him, barely stopping myself from asking what he’d been doing all night. Flowers were still woven into his hair, and I couldn’t tell if those were scratches on his bare skin or not. “That was Rowan,” I told him instead. “I don’t know how he snuck through the camp, but he did. And you can be sure he’s off to tell the false king I’m here.”

Ash narrowed his eyes. “Then we should be ready for them.”

The sharp blast of a horn echoed over the trees then, loud and sudden. It was followed by another, and another, as faeries jerked awake or emerged from their tents, blinking in alarm. Ash raised his head and followed the sound, the ghost of a vicious smile crossing his face.

“They’re coming.”

The camp erupted into organized chaos. Fey leaped to their feet, snatching weapons and armor. Captains and lieutenants appeared, barking orders, directing their squads to form ranks. Gryphon and wyvern handlers ran to get their beasts ready for combat, and knights began saddling their fey steeds, while the horses tossed their heads and pranced with anticipation. For a moment, I had the surreal feeling of being in the center of a medieval fantasy film, *Lord of the Rings* style, with all the knights and horses rushing back and forth. Then the full realization hit, making me slightly nauseous. This wasn’t a movie. This was a real battle, with real creatures that would do their best to kill me.

“Meghan Chase!”

A pair of female satyrs trotted toward me, ducking and weaving through the crowd, their furry goat legs skipping over the mud. “Your father sent us to make sure you were suitably attired for the battle,” one of them told me as they drew close. “He had something designed especially for you. If you would follow us, please.”

I winced. The last time Oberon had had something designed especially for me, it was a horribly fancy dress that I'd refused to wear. But Ash released my arm and gave me a gentle nudge toward the waiting satyrs.

"Go with them," he told me. "I have to find something for myself, as well."

"Ash…"

"I'll be back soon. Take care of her, Goodfellow." And he jogged away, vanishing into the crowds.

The satyrs beckoned impatiently, and we followed them to a strange white tent on the Summer side of the camp. The material was light and gauzy, draped over the poles in wispy strands that reminded me uncomfortably of spiderwebs. The satyrs ushered me through the flaps, but I turned and stopped Puck at the entrance, firmly telling him he would have to wait outside while I dressed. Ignoring his stupid leer, hoping he wouldn't turn into a mouse so he could sneak in and watch, I went inside.

The interior of the tent was dark and warm, the walls covered with webbing that rustled and slithered, as if hundreds of tiny creatures were scurrying through it. A tall, pale woman with long dark hair waited for me in the dim room, her eyes gleaming-black orbs in her pinched face.

"Meghan Chase," the woman rasped, huge black eyes following my every move. "You have arrived. How fortuitous that we meet again."

"Lady Weaver." I nodded, recognizing the Seelie Court's head seamstress, and stifled the urge to rub my arms. I'd met her before on my first trip into Faery, and like before, her presence made me feel itchy, as if thousands of bugs were crawling over my skin.

"Come, come," Lady Weaver said, beckoning me with one pale, spiderlike hand. "The battle is about to commence, and your father wished for me to design your armor." She led me toward the back of the tent, where something shimmered in the gloom, held up by thin white strands. "It is my best work so far. What do you think?"

At first glance, it looked like a long coat of some sort, fastened at the waist and split to flare out behind the legs. Looking closer, I saw that the material was made up of tiny scales, flexible to the touch, yet impossibly strong. The back was strewn with intricate designs that looked almost geometric in nature. Gauntlets, greaves, leggings, and boots, made of the same scaly material, completed the outfit.

"Wow," I said, drawing closer. "It's beautiful."

Lady Weaver sniffed.

"As usual, my talents are underappreciated," she sighed, snapping her fingers at the two satyrs, who hurried forward. "Here I am, the greatest seamstress in the Nevernever, reduced to weaving dragon-scale armor for unrefined half-breeds. Very well, girl. Try it on. It will fit perfectly."

The satyrs helped me into the suit, which was lighter and more flexible than I'd thought it would be. Except for the gauntlets and greaves, I didn't even feel like I was in armor. Which I guessed was kind of the point.

"Nice," came a voice at the door, and Puck strolled in. I blinked in surprise. He was dressed for battle, too, in a leather breastplate over a suit of silvery-green mail, dark leather gauntlets, and knee-high boots. A green cloth hung from his belt, decorated with curling vines and leaves, and thick shoulder plates jutted out from his collarbone, looking like rough, spiky bark.

"Surprised, princess?" Puck shrugged, causing his shoulder spikes to jerk up. "I don't normally wear armor, but then, I don't normally have to face an army of Iron fey, either. Figured I might as well have some protection." He scanned my outfit and nodded with appreciation. "Impressive. Real dragon-scale—that'll hold up to almost anything."

"I hope so," I murmured, and Lady Weaver snorted.

"Of course it will, girl," she snapped, pursing her bloodless lips at me. "Who do you think designed this suit? Now, shoo. I have other things to work on. Out!"

Puck and I fled, ducking out of the tent. The camp was nearly empty now, ranks upon ranks of Summer and Winter fey lining the edge of the metal forest. Waiting for the battle to begin.

I shivered and rubbed my arms. As if reading my thoughts, Puck moved closer and put a hand on my elbow. "Don't worry, princess," he said. And though his voice was light, there was a hard edge to his smile. "Any Iron bastard that wants you will have to get past *me*, first." He rolled his eyes. "And of course, the dark knight over there."

"Where?" I followed his gaze, just in time to see Ash appear from behind a tent and walk toward us. His armor gleamed under the sun, black marked with icy silver, a stylized wolf head on the breastplate. He looked incredibly dangerous, the black knight out of legend, a tattered cape fluttering behind him.

“Oberon has called for you,” he announced, taking in my suit with a single, approving nod. “He wants you to stay near the back, where the fighting won’t reach you. He has a platoon of bodyguards stationed there to protect—”

“I’m not going.”

Both Ash and Puck blinked at me. “I’m fighting,” I said in the firmest voice I could manage. “I don’t want to hang back and watch everyone die for me. This is my war, too.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, princess?”

I glanced at Puck and smiled. “Are you going to stop me?”

He held up his hands. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” He grinned and shook his head. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

I looked at Ash, wondering what he thought of this, if he would try to talk me down. He gazed back with a solemn expression, teacher to student, sizing me up. “You’ve never fought in a real war,” he said softly, and I caught the trace of worry in his voice. “You don’t know what real battle is like. It’s nothing like a one-on-one duel. It will be violent and bloody and chaotic, and you won’t have any time to think about what you’re doing. The things you’ve seen, the things you’ve experienced—nothing will have prepared you for this. Goodfellow and I will protect you as best we can, but you *will* have to fight, and you *will* have to kill. Without mercy. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.” I raised my chin and stared back, meeting his eyes. “I’m sure.”

“Good.” He nodded once, and turned toward the looming forest. “Because here they come.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
THE CREEPING IRON

"Get ready," Ash muttered, and drew his sword.

My hand shook as I followed his example, the blade awkward and clumsy in my grasp. Ahead of us, light glinted off swords, shields, and armor, a menacing wall of bristling faery steel. Trolls and ogres shifted impatiently, gripping their spiked clubs. Goblins and redcaps licked their pointed teeth, bloodlust shining from their eyes. Dryads, hammadryads, and oakmen waited silently, their green and brown faces tight with hate and fear. Out of all the fey, the slow corruption of the Nevernever affected them most of all and reminded me what was at stake.

I gripped the hilt of my sword, feeling the metal bite into my palm. *Come on, then,* I thought, as a great rustling sounded just beyond the hole—hundreds of feet, marching toward us. Branches snapped, trees shook, and the armies of Summer and Winter howled in reply. *You won't beat me. The false king isn't going to win. Your advance stops right here.*

"Here we go," Ash growled, as with the screeching of a million knives, the Iron fey broke from the forest and came into view. Wiremen and Iron knights, clockwork hounds, spider-hags, skeletal creatures that looked like the Terminator, all shiny and metallic, and hundreds more of different shapes and sizes, pouring out of the forest in a huge, chaotic swarm. For a moment, the two armies stared at each other, hate and violence and bloodlust shining from their eyes. Then, a monstrous armored knight, horns bristling from a steel helm, stepped to the front of the army and swept an arm forward, and the Iron fey charged with hair-raising shrieks.

The Seelie and Unseelie roared in response, surging forward to meet them. Like ants, they spilled onto the battlefield, the space between them growing smaller and smaller as they closed on each other. The two armies met with the deafening screech and clang of weapons, and then everything dissolved into madness.

Ash and Puck pressed close, refusing to advance, only engaging an enemy if it attacked first. The front lines held off the worst of the battle, but gradually the Iron fey began slipping through the holes and pushing

toward the back. I gripped my weapon and tried to focus, but it was hard. Everything was happening so fast, bodies whirling by, swords flashing, the shrieks and howls of the wounded. A giant praying mantis–thing lunged at me, bladed arms sweeping down, but Ash stepped in front of it and caught the edges with his sword, shoving it back. An Iron knight, dressed head to toe in plate mail, rushed me, but tripped as Puck kicked him in the knee and sent him sprawling.

Another armored knight broke through the back ranks, slicing at me with his weapon, a serrated, two-handed broad-sword. Reacting on instinct, I dodged the blow and stabbed at him with my sword. It screeched off his breastplate, leaving a shiny gash in the armor but not hurting him. The knight bellowed a laugh, confident in his victory, and lunged again, sweeping his blade across at my head. Ducking the blow, I stepped forward and plunged my sword through his visor, feeling the tip strike the back of his helm.

The knight dropped like his strings had been cut. My stomach roiled, but there was no time to think about what I'd just done. More Iron fey were pouring from the woods. I saw Oberon charge into the fray on a huge black warhorse, glamour swirling around him, and sweep a hand toward the thickest of the fighting. Vines and roots erupted from the ground, coiling around the Iron fey, strangling them or pulling them beneath the earth. Atop a rise, Mab raised her arms, and a savage whirlwind swept across the field, freezing fey solid or impaling them with ice shards. The armies of Summer and Winter howled with renewed vigor and threw themselves at the enemy.

And then, something monstrous broke through the trees, lumbering onto the field. A huge iron beetle, the size of a bull elephant, plowed into the chaos, crushing fey underfoot. Four elves with metallic, shimmering hair sat atop a platform on its back, shooting old-style muskets into the crowd. Summer and Winter fey fell under a hail of musket fire as another beetle broke through the trees. Swords and arrows bounced off the dark, shiny carapaces as the tanklike bugs waddled farther into the camp, leaving death in their wake.

"Fall back!" Oberon's voice boomed over the field as the beetles continued their rampage. "Fall back and regroup! Go!"

As Summer and Winter forces began drawing back, a ripple of Iron glamour washed over me, coming from the bugs. Narrowing my eyes and

peering through the madness, I looked closer. It was as if the bugs came into clear focus through a blurry background; I could see the Iron glamour shimmering around them, cold and colorless. The thick, bulky carapaces were near invulnerable, but the beetle's legs were thin and spindly, barely strong enough to hold the monsters up. The joints were weak and spotted with rust…and the ghost of an idea floated through my mind.

"Ash, Puck!" I whirled on them, and their attention snapped to me. "I think I know how to take down that bug, but I need to get closer! Clear me a path!"

Puck blinked, looking incredulous. "Uh, running toward the enemy? Isn't that like the opposite of what *fall back* means?"

"We have to stop those bugs before they kill half the camp!" I looked at Ash, pleading. "I can do this, but I need you to guard me when I get up there. Please, Ash."

Ash stared at me a moment, then nodded curtly. "We'll get you there," he muttered, raising his sword. "Goodfellow, back me up."

He lunged forward, against the tide of retreating fey. Puck shook his head and followed. We fought our way through the center of the field, where bodies of faeries—or what had been faeries—littered the ground. The fighting was much thicker here, and my bodyguards were hard-pressed to keep the enemy off me.

A roar of musket fire rang out, and a wyvern screeched and crashed to the ground a few yards away, flapping and thrashing. The bulk of the beetle loomed overhead, shiny black carapace blocking out the sun.

"Is this…close enough, princess?" Puck panted, locked in battle with a pair of wiremen, their razor-wire claws slashing at him. At his side, Ash snarled and crossed swords with an Iron knight, filling the air with the scream of metal.

I nodded, heart racing. "Just keep them off me for a few seconds!" I called, and turned back toward the iron bug, staring at its underside. Yes, the legs were jointed, held together by metal bolts. As a spindly leg swept by, I dodged and closed my eyes, drawing Iron glamour from the air, from the bug and the trees and the corrupted land around me. Musket fire boomed, and the screech of swords and faeries rang in my head, but I trusted my guardians to keep me safe and kept concentrating.

Opening my eyes, I focused on one of the insect's joints, on the tiny bolt that held it together, and *pulled.* The nut trembled, shaking with rust,

and then flew out like a cork, a brief glint of metal under the sun. The insect lurched as the leg crumpled and fell off into the mud, and then the whole beetle started to tip like an off-balanced bus.

"Yes!" I cheered, just as the wave of nausea hit. A stab of pain ripped through my stomach, and I fell to my knees, fighting the urge to vomit. A shadow engulfed me, and I looked up to see the enormous bulk of the insect falling sideways, scattering Iron fey and faeries alike, but I couldn't move.

A blur of darkness, and then Ash grabbed me by the arm, yanking me upright. We leaped forward, as with a mighty groan, the beetle crashed to the ground and rolled over, crushing the musket elves beneath it and nearly killing me in the process. On its back, the beetle's remaining legs kicked and flailed uselessly, and I giggled with slight hysterics. Ash muttered something inscrutable and pulled me into a brief, tight embrace.

"You enjoy making my heart stop, don't you?" he whispered, and I felt him shaking with adrenaline or something else. Before I could form a reply, he released me and stepped back, a stoic bodyguard once more.

Panting, I gazed around to see the Iron fey drawing back, vanishing into the metal forest again. The other beetle seemed trapped under a writhing mess of vines, tangling its legs and dragging it down. The musketeers on its back had been impaled with huge spears of ice. Mab and Oberon's doing, probably.

"Is it over?" I asked as Puck joined us, also breathing hard, his armor spattered with some icky black substance, like oil. "Did we win?"

Puck nodded, but his eyes were grim. "In a matter of speaking, princess."

Puzzled, I looked around, and my stomach twisted. Bodies from both sides lay scattered about the field, some moaning, some still and lifeless. A few had already turned to stone, ice, dirt, branches, water, or had faded away entirely. Sometimes it happened instantly, sometimes it took hours, but faeries didn't leave physical bodies behind when they died. They simply ceased to exist.

But, more disturbing, as I looked closer, I saw that the Iron forest had crept even closer, so much that it had spread to the center of the camp. As I watched in horror, a young green sapling turned shiny and metallic, gray poison creeping up its trunk. Several leaves snapped off and plummeted down to stick in the earth, glimmering like knives.

“It is spreading even faster now.” A shadow fell over us, and Oberon swept up on his warhorse, eyes glowing amber beneath his antlered helm. “Every battle, we are forced to fall back, to give more ground. For every Winter or Summer faery that falls, the Iron Kingdom grows, destroying all in its path. If this keeps up, there will be nothing left.” Oberon’s voice took on a sharper edge. “Also, I thought I told you to stay out of the battle, Meghan Chase. And yet, you fling yourself into the heart of danger, despite my attempts to keep you safe. Why do you continue to defy me?”

Ignoring the question, I looked to the dark forest where the last of the Iron fey were disappearing. Just beyond the tree line, I felt the Iron Kingdom crouched at the edge, eager to creep forward again, watching me with its poisoned glare. Somewhere out there, safe in his land of iron, the false king waited for me, patient and assured, knowing the courts couldn’t touch him.

“He knows I’m here now,” I murmured, feeling Oberon’s eyes on me, as well as the twin gazes of Puck and Ash, and swallowed the tremor in my voice. “I can’t stay—he’ll send everything he has at you trying to get to me.”

“When will you leave?” Oberon’s voice held no emotion. I took a quiet breath and hoped I wasn’t sending Ash and Puck straight to their deaths.

“Tonight.” As soon as I said it, I shivered violently and crossed my arms to hide my terror. “The sooner I go, the better. I guess it’s time.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
INTO THE IRON REALM

I folded the blanket carefully and placed it in the pack, next to the packages of dried fruit and nuts and the goatskin of water. Water, food, blanket, bedroll…was there anything else I needed for the camping trip to hell? I could think of a few purely human conveniences I'd kill to have right then—flashlight, aspirin, toilet paper—but Faery refused to humor my half-mortal side, so I'd have to do without.

Behind me, the tent flap opened, and Ash stood there, silhouetted against the tent wall and the eerie red light of the moon. "Ready?"

I flipped the bag shut and fumbled with the ties, cursing softly as my hands shook. "As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose," I muttered, hoping he wouldn't catch the tremor in my voice. The ties slipped from my fingers again, and I growled a curse.

The tent flaps closed, and a moment later his arms were around me, covering my shaking hands with his own. Closing my eyes, I relaxed into him as he bent close, his breath cool on my neck.

"I don't want to be their assassin," I whispered, leaning into him. He didn't say anything, only fisted his hands over mine, drawing me closer. "I thought…when I killed Machina…I wouldn't have to do anything like that ever again. I still have nightmares about it." Sighing, I buried my face in his arm. "I'm not backing out. I know I have to do this, but…I'm not a killer, Ash."

"I know," he murmured against my skin. "And you're *not* a killer. Look." Opening his fists, he held my hands in his, stroking my palms with his thumbs. "Perfectly clean," he said. "No stains, no blood. Trust me, if you could see mine…" He sighed and closed his fists again, curling his fingers around my own. "I would save you from my fate, if I could," he said, so soft I barely heard him, even as close as we were. "Let me kill the false king. I have so much blood on my hands, it wouldn't matter."

"You would do that?"

"If I can."

I thought about it, content to feel his arms around me. “I guess…as long as the false king dies, it doesn’t matter who kills him, right?” Ash shrugged, but I felt uncomfortable with that decision. This was *my* quest. *I* had agreed to kill the false king. The responsibility was mine, and I didn’t want anyone to have to kill for me again, especially Ash.

Although, I still didn’t know how I was going to accomplish any of this when we got there. We didn’t have a magic Witchwood arrow this time. We just had…me. “Let’s not worry about it now,” I said, not wanting to think about it anymore. “We have to *reach* him first, anyway.”

“Which we’ll never do if you two keep groping each other every two seconds,” Puck announced, entering the room with a swooshing of tent flaps. Blushing, I stepped away from Ash and pretended to check my pack. Puck snorted. “If you two are quite ready,” he said, pushing back the cloth, “we’re all waiting on you.”

We left the tent, stepping into the cold, still night. My breath clouded the air, and sooty flakes landed on my face and hands. On each side, lining the way to the forest, the armies of Summer and Winter watched us leave, hundreds of fey eyes glowing in the darkness. Somewhere in the camp, a wyvern screeched, but other than that, everything was silent.

Mab and Oberon stood at the edge of the crowd, both as still as the trees themselves. Beyond the rulers, the glimmering forest of steel stretched away into darkness.

“We have given you everything we can,” Oberon said as we approached, his solemn voice echoing over the crowds. “From here on, we can only wish you luck, and wait. Everything is up to you now.”

Mab raised a hand, and a goblin stepped out of the crowd to stand before us, dressed in that leafy camouflage that made him look like a bush. “Snigg will take you to the edge of the forest where it becomes the Wasteland proper,” she rasped, her gaze lingering on Ash. “Beyond that, you’re on your own. None of our scouts have ever returned from venturing deeper.”

Oberon was still watching me, his green eyes unreadable in the shadows of his face. It seemed to me that the Erlking looked tired and haggard, but that could simply be a trick of the light. “Be careful, daughter,” he said in a voice meant only for me.

I sighed. That was as much fatherly affection Oberon was going to dole out. “I will,” I told him, shifting my pack to my other shoulder. “And we

won’t fail, I—” I barely stopped myself from saying “I *swear*,” not knowing whether I could keep that promise. “I won’t give up,” I finished instead.

He gave me a brief nod. Ash bowed to his queen, and Puck grinned at Oberon, defiant to the end. I looked down at the goblin.

“Let’s go, Snigg.”

The goblin bobbed and shuffled away into the trees, becoming nearly invisible in the brush. With Ash and Puck at my side, I stepped into the forest, following the bobbing mound of vegetation through the trees, and the camp soon faded behind us.

* * *

“I RECOGNIZE THIS,” Ash muttered after several minutes of walking. Following the goblin scout, we ducked and wove around trees whose trunks looked like they’d been covered in mercury, shiny and metallic in the dappled light. “I think I know where we are.”

“Really.” Puck sounded sarcastic. “I was wondering when you’d figure it out, prince. Granted, none of the masses knew how close they were, either, so props for knowing your history.” He snorted. “You can bet both Oberon and Mab knew it, and deliberately didn’t let on. Typical.”

“Why?” I glanced around, seeing nothing unusual—beyond the strangeness of a completely metal forest, anyway. “Where are we?”

“This is Fomorian territory,” Ash said, narrowing his eyes. “We’re heading right for Mag Tuiredh.”

I blinked at Ash. “What’s Mag Tuiredh? What are Fomorians?”

“An ancient race of giants, princess,” Puck answered, ducking a low-hanging branch. “Semiaquatic, clannish and the ugliest bastards you’d ever have the misfortune of seeing. Deformed and twisted, the lot of them. I’m talking one-armed, one-eyed terrors with hooves growing out of their heads, limbs in places they’re not supposed to be. One of their queens even had a set of teeth on each of her—”

“Okay, I think I got it.” I shuddered, skirting a bush with metal thorns growing out of it like needles. “So, are these giant things hostile? Do you think they’ve been killed by the iron?”

“Oh, they were definitely hostile,” Puck continued cheerfully. “In fact, they were so hostile, we had a war with them, long, long ago. I think it was

the *only* other time Summer and Winter cooperated, right prince? Oh, wait, you weren't even around yet, were you?"

"They're extinct, Meghan," Ash said, ignoring Puck. "They've been extinct for centuries. Summer and Winter completely wiped them out. Mag Tuiredh was their city. It's nothing but ruins now, and generally everyone avoids it. It's an evil place, full of curses and unknown monsters. One of the darker places of the Nevernever."

"And the perfect place for the new Iron King," I mused.

We fell silent then, for the trees abruptly fell away and the Iron Kingdom stretched out before us.

I remembered the heart of Machina's realm, the flat, cracked plateau, spiderwebbed with lava, and the endless railroad that led to the black tower. This was different, a blasted, rocky desert with huge, jagged outcroppings and uneven hills. Looking closer, I saw that some of the hills were huge piles of junk: tires, pipes, smashed cars, rusty barrels, satellite dishes, broken computers and laptops, even the wing of an airplane. Street lamps grew out of the rocky ground or atop distant outcroppings, glimmering faintly in the haze. The corroded red moon, balanced atop two pointed ridges, seemed closer than ever.

"Interesting," Puck remarked, crossing his arms to his chest. "You know, I used to say Fomorian territory couldn't get any worse than it was. Nice to know I can still be proven wrong once in a while."

Ash stepped forward, gazing around the wasteland in silence. His back was to me, so I couldn't see his face, but he was probably remembering our last trip into the Iron Kingdom. I wondered if he was already regretting his promise.

Snigg the goblin gave a feeble cough, muttered an apology, and scurried back into the forest the way we'd come, leaving us to our fate. Suddenly alarmed, I looked harder at Ash and Puck, cursing myself for not realizing sooner. We were deep in the Iron Realm now; Ash and Puck would be feeling the effects of the land, the poison that would kill them if those amulets didn't work.

"Are you two all right? Ash? Look at me." I grabbed the prince's arm and turned him toward me, peering into his face. His skin seemed paler than usual, and my stomach twisted. "The amulets aren't working, are they? I knew it. We should go back."

“No.” Ash put his hand over mine. “It’s fine, Meghan. They’re working well enough. I can still feel the iron, but it’s bearable. Not like before.”

“Are you sure?” When he nodded, I looked from him to Puck. “What about you?”

Puck shrugged. “It’s no Shiatsu massage, princess, but I’ll live.”

I glared at them. “I know faeries can’t lie, but you two better not be saying that just so I won’t worry.” Neither of them said anything, and my anger rose. “I mean it, you two.”

“Relax, princess.” Puck shrugged defensively. “They’re working, okay? I know I’m not supposed to feel great, but I don’t feel like my insides are about to crawl up my throat, either. I’ll live. I’ve been through worse.”

“And it doesn’t matter.” Ash faced me with an air of stubborn calm. “We’d still be here, regardless. We can’t go back now. Besides, we’re wasting time.”

“I agree,” came another voice, deeper in the Iron Realm. “The protective qualities of your amulets are limited, after all. The longer you stand around doing nothing, the shorter your time becomes.”

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised. “Grimalkin,” I sighed, turning around. “Stop hiding. Where are you?”

The cat glanced up from a nearby rock, where nothing had been a second ago. “You,” he purred, regarding us lazily, “are late. Again.”

“Why are you here, Grim?”

“Is it not obvious?” Grimalkin yawned and looked at each of us in turn. “The same reason I am always here, human. To keep you from falling down a dark hole or wandering into a giant spider’s nest.”

“You can’t stay here,” I told him. “The iron will kill you and you don’t have an amulet.”

Grimalkin sniffed. “Really, human, you are incredibly dim at times. Who do you think told Mab about the amulets in the first place?” He raised his chin, just far enough for me to catch a glint of crystal beneath his wavy fur.

“*You* have one? How?”

The cat sat down and licked his forepaw. “Do you really wish to know, human?” he asked, giving me a sideways glance. “Be careful of your answer. Some things are better off a mystery.”

“What kind of answer is that? Of course I want to know, especially now!”

He sighed, vibrating his whiskers. “Very well. But, keep in mind, you insisted.” Putting his paw down, he sat up and curled his tail around himself, regarding me with a grave expression. “Do you remember the day Ironhorse died?”

A lump caught in my throat. Of course I did. I could never forget that night. Ironhorse charging the enemy alone so we could have a distraction; Ironhorse shielding me from a fatal blow; Ironhorse, shattered and broken on the cement floor of the warehouse. His last words. I teared up, thinking about it.

And then, I remembered Grimalkin, sitting beside the noble Iron faery just before he died, leaning close to his head. I’d thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, for I’d caught only a split-second glance before the cat was gone, but now it seemed extremely important that I remember.

My stomach felt cold. “What did you do to him, Grim?”

“Nothing.” Grimalkin faced me with an unblinking stare. “Nothing that he had not already agreed to. I knew I would have to go into the Iron Realm sooner or later, and Ironhorse knew he could very well die on his quest to help you. He was prepared for it. We came to…an understanding.”

“Oh my God.” The realization hit me like a hammer, and I gaped at the cat. “That’s him in there, isn’t it? You used Ironhorse for your amulet.” I felt sick and staggered away from the cait sith, bumping into Ash. “How could you?” I whispered, actually beginning to shake. “Is *everything* a contract to you? Ironhorse was our friend, I would have died without his help. Or don’t you care that you’re using him like a battery?”

“Ironhorse was prepared to give up everything for you, human.” Grimalkin narrowed his eyes to golden slits, staring me down. “He wanted this. He wanted a way to protect you if he were no longer here. You should be grateful. I would not have done the same. Because of his sacrifice, the quest can continue.” The cat rose and leaped from the rock, turning to stare at us over his shoulder.

“Well?” he asked, waving his tail. “Are you coming or not?”

I scowled and took a few steps forward. “Where do you think you’re taking us?”

He twitched an ear. “Ironhorse told me, should I ever find myself in the Iron Realm with you, to look for an old friend of his. The Clockmaker,

I believe was his name. And he is fairly close. Lucky for us."

"Why go to the Clockmaker? Why not just look for the false king?"

"Ironhorse implied that this was important, human." Grimalkin blinked and sat down, thumping his tail impatiently. "But, if you do not think so, by all means go wandering about until the amulets lose their power and you are completely lost. Or, was that your plan all along?"

I glanced at the boys. They both shrugged. "Seems as good a plan as any," Puck said, rolling his eyes. "If the cat knows where he's going, that is. I'd hate to get lost in here."

Grimalkin sniffed, curling his whiskers in disdain. "Please, do not insult me. Lost? Since when have I ever led you wrong?"

I sighed. "Here we go again."

* * *

After a night of walking, I realized just how *big* the Fomorian city was.

I'd imagined Mag Tuiredh as a city of sprawling ruins: crumbled stone walls, half-erect buildings, and just a scattering of large rocks where a castle once stood. And perhaps, if it had been in the real world, that's all it would have been. But in the Nevernever, where age and time didn't exist and even the structures resisted the concept of decay, Mag Tuiredh loomed tall and threatening in the hazy distance, black towers belching smoke into the mottled yellow sky.

"How old is this city?" I asked, shielding my eyes to peer across the barren landscape. Even through the mottled yellow-gray clouds, the light still glinted off a thousand metallic things, flashing in the sun and blinding me. Puck and Grimalkin had seen some movement in the rocks, and were scouting around to find the source of it.

"No one really knows," Ash replied, his gaze sweeping over the landscape. "The Fomorians were here before us, and their city was already massive. Back then, Mag Tuiredh sat half in and half out of the mortal realm, in a place known today as Ireland. Because humans still worshipped us as gods and the Nevernever was still very young, many faery races preferred to live in the mortal realm. The Fomorians had already enslaved several lesser races, and tried to do the same to us. Naturally, we didn't take very kindly to that."

"So there was a war."

“One that rocked the foundations of both realms. In the end, Mag Tuiredh was pulled completely into the Nevernever, and the Fomorians were driven into the sea. That was the last anyone saw of them. At least, that’s the story I’ve heard.”

“But if they’re gone…” I looked back to the city and the dark smoke boiling into the sky “…why are those things still smoking?”

“I don’t know.” Ash shifted his gaze to the distant towers. “Mag Tuiredh supposedly sat empty for thousands of years, but who knows what it’s been turned into now. Judging from that smoke, I would say Mag Tuiredh is no longer uninhabited.”

“Bad news.” Puck suddenly dropped from an overhead slab, landing beside us with a poof of dust. “We’re being followed. Grim and I saw something that looked like a giant metal insect, buzzing along behind us. I tried to catch the little bastard, but it saw me coming and booked it.”

“You think there are more of them?” Ash tensed and dropped his hand to his sword, probably remembering the gremlin hoard swarming him in the mines on our first trip here. Puck’s eyes darkened, and he shook his head.

“Dunno. But I think someone knows we’re here.”

Grim popped into view on a rock, twitching his tail. His wispy gray fur stood on end like he’d just come out of a dryer with horrible static cling. “There is a storm coming. We should seek cover.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a flash of lightning lit the sky and the air filled with the tang of ozone.

The hairs on my neck stood up. “Grim,” I gasped, whirling on the feline, “get us out of here! We have to find shelter now!”

Whether it was my terrified look or the panic in my voice, the cat didn’t dawdle this time. We fled, scrambling over dirt and rock, while above us the sky turned from yellow-gray to black in a matter of seconds. Sharp-smelling wind whipped at our clothes and made my eyes water, and the air around us felt charged with electricity. A thread of green lightning slashed the sky, and the first drops began to fall.

A searing pain stabbed me in the thigh, and I clenched my teeth to keep from screaming, knowing one of the acidic drops had just hit me. Somewhere behind us, Puck yelped in shock and surprise. My stomach churned, and I could no longer see the cat in the darkness and rising wind.

“Grimalkin!” I yelled in desperation.

“This way!” The cat’s yowl cut through the growing storm, and two glowing eyes suddenly appeared at the mouth of a cave in the side of a cliff. The cave was so well hidden, blending perfectly into the landscape, that had Grimalkin not been there I never would’ve seen it.

Another drop hit my forehead, sliding down my cheek, and this time I did scream as a line of fire slashed down my skin. I could hear the hiss of the rain striking all around us, and I threw myself into the cave, followed by Ash and Puck, just as the sky opened with a roar and the rain poured down.

Gasping, I lay on my back on the sandy floor, watching the storm sweep the land, while Ash and Puck leaned against the cave wall, panting.

“Well, that was…different,” Puck gasped. “What the hell is that anyway?”

“Acid rain,” I said, not having the will to push myself off the floor just yet. My face throbbed, and the sand was cool against my cheek. “We ran into it on our first trip here, too. Not fun.”

“Welcome to the wonders of the Iron Kingdom,” Ash muttered, and pushed himself off the wall, coming to kneel beside me. I took his hand and let him pull me into a sitting position.

“Are you all right?” he asked, brushing the hair from my face, lifting it away from the burn. His fingers hovered over the wound, and I flinched despite myself, causing him to sigh. I saw Puck watching us over Ash’s shoulder, and blushed self-consciously, suddenly desperate to break the tension.

“So, tell me the truth,” I said, only half joking. “Will it scar? Will I have to wear a mask like the Phantom of the Opera, to hide my hideous face?”

Ash shrugged off his pack, and a moment later a cool, familiar-smelling salve touched my cheek, soothing the fiery pain. “I think you’ll be fine,” he said, smiling faintly. “No battle scars for you, at least not today.” His hand lingered on my face a moment more before he rose, drawing me to my feet. Puck snorted and walked away, pretending to examine the cave.

Grimalkin strutted by, tail in the air, oblivious to the rising tension. “The rain will not let up anytime soon,” he said as he passed, “so I suggest you get some rest while you can. I also suggest one of you take watch. We

do not want to be surprised if the owner of this cave returns while we are asleep."

"Good idea," Puck echoed from the back of the cave. "Why don't you take first watch, prince? You could actually be doing something that doesn't make me want to gouge my eyes out with a spork."

Ash's lips curled in a smirk. "I would think you're better suited to the task, Goodfellow," he said without turning around. "After all, that's what you're best at, isn't it? Watching?"

"Oh, keep it up, ice-boy. You're gonna have to sleep sometime."

I rolled my eyes at them. "Fine. You two fight it out—I'm going to try to get some sleep." Unshouldering my pack, I stalked to a corner, dumped out the contents, and unrolled my sleeping bag. Lying on the sandy floor, I listened to Ash and Puck's back-and-forth banter as they set up camp, throwing out insults and challenges. Strangely, it seemed more normal than it had been until now, and I fell asleep to their voices and the sound of the rain.

* * *

HE WAS WAITING FOR ME in my dreams again.

I sighed. "Machina," I said, facing the Iron King, my voice nearly lost in the surrounding void, "why are you here? I thought I told you to leave me alone. I don't need you."

"No," he murmured, smiling as his cables cloaked him in a cage of glimmering steel. "That is not true. You've come far, but you're still not there yet, Meghan Chase. You still need me."

"I don't." I didn't move as he approached, the cables reaching out to snake around me. "I'm stronger now than when we first met. I'm learning to control the magic you left me with." With a thought, I pushed the cables away, causing them to rear back in surprise.

"You still don't understand." Machina withdrew his extensions, folding them like shimmery wings behind his back. "You use the magic like a tool, like a sword that you swing in awkward circles, cutting wildly at those around you. If you are to win, you must embrace it fully, make it a part of you. If you would only let me show you how."

"You've given me enough," I said bitterly. "I didn't ask for this. I didn't want it. If you were alive, I would be happy if you took it back."

“I could not.” Machina regarded me with depthless black eyes. “The power of the Iron King can be given, or it can be lost. It cannot be taken.”

I frowned. “Then…why is the false king trying to kill me? If the power can only be given away, why is he trying to take it by force?”

Machina shook his head. “The false king has never learned how a king is chosen. Believing he can wrench the power from you by force, he has become blind in his obsession. He does not realize his actions only make him less worthy.”

“If I die…then the power is lost?”

Machina nodded. “Unless you give it away yourself, or it chooses a new successor.”

“Can’t I just give it away now?”

“No,” Machina said flatly. “If the power is to be given, it must be given at the moment of death. When the bearer knows they are going to die, only then will the power leave the body. If the bearer dies without choosing a successor, the power will lie dormant, waiting, until someone comes along who is worthy to bear it. But no, you cannot just give it away whenever you please.” Machina sounded faintly insulted at the thought. “Besides, Meghan Chase, who would you give it to? Who would you find worthy enough to carry that burden?”

“I suppose that means you somehow found me worthy,” I muttered, “though I really wish you wouldn’t have bothered.”

The Iron King only smiled.

“I will be here,” he murmured, fading away, his brightness becoming less and less, though his voice still echoed in the void. “You cannot win without me, Meghan Chase. Until we are one, you are destined to lose this war.”

* * *

I OPENED MY EYES TO SILENCE. The rain had stopped, and a warm furry weight was pressed against my ribs, vibrating with purrs. Careful not to disturb Grimalkin, I rose and pushed back the covers, gazing around the cave. Puck lay on his back in the corner, tangled in blankets, one arm flung over his eyes. A jackhammer snore echoed from his open mouth, and I grimaced.

Ash stood at the cave mouth, silhouetted black against the cloudy sky, gazing out at the distant city. From the sickly light coming in, I guessed it was mid to late afternoon. By the subtle tilt of Ash's head, I knew he'd heard me, but he didn't turn around.

Padding up behind him, I slipped my arms around his waist. His hands folded over mine, lacing our fingers together, and we stood like that for a moment, breathing in tandem, me listening to his heart through his armor.

"Are you all right?" His deep voice vibrated in my ear, pressed against his back.

"Fine." I pulled back to stare at the back of his head. "Why? Reading my emotions again, are you?"

"You were talking in your sleep," he continued solemnly. "I wasn't listening, but you said 'Machina' once or twice." He paused, and my heart flip-flopped in my chest. "It's the Iron Kingdom, isn't it?" Ash went on. "Being back here, it's making you remember."

"Yeah," I lied, pressing my face to his back. I didn't want to tell him about my conversations with the old Iron King, whom we had killed on our last trip here but who was supposedly lurking inside me. "It was just a nightmare, Ash. Don't worry about me."

"That's my job now," he replied, so soft I barely heard it. "Meghan, don't be afraid to ask for help. You're not alone. Remember that."

I squirmed uncomfortably, hoping he wouldn't pick up on my feelings of guilt. "So, this knight-and-lady thing," I said to change the subject. "Do you have to do what I say? Or is it more of a strong suggestion? If I ordered you to…I don't know…stand on your head, would you do it?"

I wasn't trying to be serious, but he hesitated, and I wondered if I touched on a sore subject. "You know my True Name now," he said after a moment. "Technically, yes, if you order me by use of my full name, I would be forced to obey. But…" He paused again. I'd never heard him sound so unsure. "The understanding is that it will never come to that. That…the lady trusts the knight enough to…"

"Ash," I interrupted. "Turn around."

He obeyed, spinning slowly to face me, his expression carefully guarded. Lacing my hands behind his neck, I pulled him down and kissed him. For just a moment, he was stiff and unyielding, but then he relaxed and his arms slid around my waist, drawing us closer.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered when we pulled back. “I don’t want you to regret…being here with me, being my knight and all.”

He ran his fingers through my hair, brushing it from my cheek. “If I’d thought I would regret it,” he said calmly, “I never would have made that oath. I knew what becoming a knight would mean. And if you asked me again, the answer would be the same.” He sighed, framing my face with his hands. “My life…everything I am…belongs to you.”

My eyes prickled as Ash leaned in and kissed me.

A particularly loud snore came from the cave, and the lump in the corner rolled toward us suspiciously. Ash sighed again, drawing back after giving the “sleeping” Puck a resigned look. “We should leave soon,” he murmured, glancing toward the city. “If we go now, we can reach Mag Tuiredh before nightfall. Also, I saw Puck’s metal insect, flying around out there. It’s definitely following us. And if it does attack, I’d rather be able to see it coming than have to fight it in the dark.”

I shivered and dropped my gaze, staring at the amulet on his chest. The crystal was no longer perfectly clear. Inside, the swirls were silvery and metallic, like the mercury inside a thermometer. It gave me a chill, like staring at the falling grains of an hourglass, reminding me that his time in the Iron Realm was limited. “Right,” I said, breaking away. “Let’s get going then. Puck, I know you’re awake. We’re leaving.”

“Oh, thank God.” Puck snorted and hopped to his feet. “I was afraid I’d have to listen to you two slobber all morning. I’m already feeling slightly sick—please don’t make it worse.”

“Indeed,” Grimalkin added from the mouth of the cave, though he had been sleeping on my blanket a second before. “Let us go. We are running out of time.”

Quickly, we gathered our supplies and set out again. The looming Fomorian city beckoned in the distance.

As we left the cave, following Grim and Puck over the rocks, I caught a shimmer from the corner of my eye, like a heat wave, darting behind a boulder. I stopped and glanced back, but empty sand and rock greeted me when I turned my head.

“Did you see it?” Ash muttered as we started down the dusty path again.

Frowning, I glared around the landscape, wincing as the sun flashed off the random metallic objects scattered everywhere. “I don’t know. I thought

I saw…something. Like a shimmer almost, but a clear one. You saw it?"

He nodded, his hunter's gaze never still, constantly scanning. "Something is tracking us," he said in a low voice. "Goodfellow knows it, too. Keep alert. We could run into trouble soo—"

It attacked from the top of a boulder, leaping at us with a scream. One second, there was nothing. The next, that strange shimmer rippled through the air again, and something slammed into me, raking my armor with invisible claws that screeched against the dragon-scale. I staggered back as a long feline shape, large as a cougar and translucent as glass, leaped away from Ash's sword and darted into the rocks again.

I drew my sword with a raspy screech as Puck pulled his daggers, his eyes darting around the empty landscape. "Anyone wanna tell me what *that* was?" he said, just as a second transparent cat-thing leaped at him from the opposite direction. I yelled and he ducked, the cat barely missing him. Landing in a spray of dust, it bounded into the rocks and vanished.

We moved to stand back-to-back, weapons out in front of us, searching for a glimpse of our invisible assailants. *No,* I thought, *not invisible,* that didn't make sense, not in the Iron Kingdom. Grimalkin could become invisible, using normal glamour to do so—in fact, he had already disappeared. Regular glamour was the magic of illusion and myth, things the Iron fey could not work with, so how were they hiding their presence? What was the logical explanation?

There was a blur as the monster cats attacked again, rushing in from opposite sides. I didn't see them until one was right on top of me, and I felt hooked claws raking my side. They were frighteningly quick. Thankfully, the dragon-scale armor held, screeching and sparking in protest, but the cat darted away again before I could react.

Puck snarled a curse, swiping at empty air as the second cat flashed behind the rocks once more and was gone. Blood dripped down his arm to spatter in the dust; he hadn't been as lucky, and my desperation grew.

Think, Meghan! There had to be an explanation. Iron fey couldn't use regular glamour, so how could a solid creature appear invisible? I could feel the Iron glamour circling around us, cold, patient, and calculating, and suddenly I understood.

"They're cloaking," I said, as the pieces clicked into place. "They're using Iron glamour to twist the light around themselves so they appear

invisible." I felt a thrill of discovery, of knowing I was right. All those years of watching *Star Trek* had finally paid off.

Ash spared me a split-second glance. "Can you use it to see which direction they're coming from?"

"I'll try."

Closing my eyes, I reached out, searching for our attackers, expanding my senses until…there. I could feel them in my mind, two clear, cat-shaped blobs of glamour, creeping forward along the ground just a few yards away. One was edging up on Ash, muscles quivering, and leaped forward with a shriek.

"Ash, high left! Seven o' clock!"

Ash whirled, exploding into motion. I heard a yowl, and the cat shape in my mind split in two just before something hot and wet splashed over my face.

Not stopping to think or gag, I saw the second cat leap straight at me, claws extended, aiming for my neck this time. My sword came up, and the monster slammed into my chest, its leap carrying it right onto the blade. The cat's weight knocked me backward to sprawl in the dust, driving the air from my lungs with a painful gasp.

For a few seconds, I could only lie there with my mouth gaping, crushed under the body of the killer feline. Up close, the dead cat was a strange metallic gray, its fur short and shiny like a mirror. But its teeth were the same yellow ivory of all big cats, pointed and lethal, and its breath stank of rotten meat and battery acid. That was all I noticed before Ash dragged the huge feline off me and Puck pulled me to my feet.

"Well, that was fun." Puck wore one of his sarcastic grimaces. "You okay, princess?"

"Yeah." I gave Ash a quick smile to ease the worry on his face, and turned to Puck again. "I'm fine—but you're bleeding, Puck!"

"What, this?" Puck grinned. "It's just a scratch." His grin turned into a grimace as I sat him down on a rock and started tearing off his sleeve. His arm was a mess, blood everywhere, and I could see the four nasty claw marks that ran from his elbow to wrist. I winced in sympathy.

"Ash, I'm going to need some of that salve you brought," I muttered, dabbing away the blood. When he didn't move, I turned on him, narrowing my eyes. "All right, I'm tired of this. I know you two don't get along, but

you need to figure something out or we're never going to make it out of here alive."

I received a rather cold stare, but he opened his bag and dug out the jar, handing it to me stiffly. Puck settled back on the rock, grinning as I bent over his arm.

"You're good at this, princess," he purred, shooting Ash a smug grin over my shoulder. "Been watching ice-boy, or are you just a natural caretaker? I could get used to—ow!"

He glared as I tied off the bandage with a jerk.

"Don't push your luck," I warned him, and he gave me a huge, doe-eyed look full of innocence. It was the first glimpse of the old Puck I'd seen in a long time, and it made me smile.

As I was gathering the medical supplies, Grimalkin appeared again, wrinkling his nose at the dead cats. "Barbarians," he sniffed, leaping down from the rock, giving the bodies a wide berth as he trotted up. "Human, you might want to know that there are certainly other creatures that will be attracted by the commotion. I would advise you to hurry."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
THE CLOCKMAKER

We reached the Fomorian city just as the sun was going down.

Mag Tuiredh was enormous. Not just sprawling, but *huge.* As in *I-feel-like-I've-been shrunk-to-the-size-of-a-mouse* huge. Like Jack-in-the-Beanstalk huge. Everything was giant-size: doorways were twenty feet tall, streets were wide enough to drive a plane through, and steps were *my* height. Whomever the Fomorians were, I hoped that they were really gone as Ash said.

The city was ancient; I could feel it as we made our way through the mossy ruins, which towered like broken giants overhead. The original buildings were made of rough stone, but the Iron Realm's corruption was everywhere. Broken street lamps popped up at odd intervals, grown right out of the ground and flickering erratically. Cables and computer wires snaked up walls, spread across the streets, and coiled around everything, as if trying to choke the life from the old city. In the distance, near the center of Mag Tuiredh, black smokestacks loomed over everything, belching smog into the hazy sky.

"So, where do we find this Clockmaker?" Puck asked as we walked through a square filled with strange metallic trees. The trees were in full bloom, not with flowers or fruit, but with lightbulbs that glowed with eerie brightness. A fountain in the middle of the square bubbled a thick, shiny black liquid that might've been oil.

Grimalkin looked back at us, eyes shining in the gloom. "The most obvious place possible," he said, and turned his gaze skyward.

Over the tops of the buildings, rising up toward the clouds like a dark needle, a giant clock tower peered down on the city with a face like a numbered moon.

"Oh." Puck craned his neck back, staring at the huge timepiece. "Well, that's…ironic." He scratched the back of his head and frowned. "I hope the Clockmaker is still awake. He probably doesn't get a lot of visitors after nine p.m."

Something about that statement put me on edge, even more so when I looked at Ash, who was staring at the clock in growing horror. “It shouldn’t be here,” he murmured, shaking his head. “How is it even working? Time doesn’t exist in the Nevernever, but that thing is recording the passing of it, keeping track. With every second it records, the Nevernever gets older.”

I remembered the way my watch stopped on my first trip to Faery, and looked at Grim in alarm. “Is that true?”

The cat blinked. “I am not an expert on the Iron Realm, human. Even I cannot give you the answers to everything.” Raising a hind leg, he scratched inside an ear, then contemplated his back toes. “But, remember this—nothing lives forever. Even the Nevernever has an age, though no one can remember what it is. That clock is not recording anything new.”

“It should be destroyed,” Ash muttered, still glaring at it.

“I would refrain from angering its keeper until we secure his help.” Grimalkin stood, stretched, then suddenly went rigid. Ears twitching, he stood motionless for a moment, listening for something beyond the circle of trees. The hair slowly rose along his back, and I gulped, knowing he was seconds away from disappearing.

“Grim?”

The cat’s ears flattened. “They are all around us,” he hissed, just before he vanished.

We drew our weapons.

Thousands of green eyes pierced the darkness, razor grins shining like neon-blue fire, as a huge hoard of gremlins poured into the light. Like ants, the swarm flowed over the ground, buzzing and hissing in their static voices, to surround us. We stood back-to-back, a tiny circle of open ground in a sea of little black monsters with grinning fangs and glowing eyes.

Thousands of voices chattered at me, like a hundred radios turned on all at once. The noise was deafening, nonsensical, high buzzing voices grating in my ears. But the gremlins didn’t attack. They stood there, dancing or hopping in place, teeth flashing like razors, but they moved no closer.

“What are they doing?” Puck asked. He had to yell to be heard.

“I don’t know!” I replied. The cacophony was giving me a headache; my ears were ringing, and it seemed the noise got even worse at the sound

of my voice. Without even thinking about it, I raised my head and yelled *"Shut up!"* into the hoard of gremlins.

Silence descended instantly. You could've heard a cricket chirp.

Wide-eyed, I shared a glance with Ash and Puck. "Why are they listening to me?" I whispered. Ash narrowed his eyes.

"I don't know, but can you do it again?"

"Back off," I tried, taking a step forward. A whole section of gremlins scooted backward, keeping the same distance between us. Another step, and they did the same thing. I blinked.

"Okay, this is creepy. Go away?" I asked, but this time the gremlins didn't move, and some of them hissed at me. I backed up. "Well, I guess I can only push them so far."

"Don't ask them to leave," Ash murmured behind me. "Tell them."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

He nodded. I swallowed and faced the hoard again, hoping they wouldn't decide to swarm me like angry piranhas. "Get out of here!" I told them, raising my voice. "Now!"

The gremlins hissed and crackled and screeched in protest, but withdrew, flowing backward like the tide, until we were alone in an empty square.

"How…interesting," Grimalkin mused, back to being visible again. "It is almost as if they were waiting for you."

"That was weird," I agreed, rubbing my arms, where I could still feel the vibrations of the gremlins buzzing on my skin. The gremlins were listening to me now, just like they had with Machina. Since I had the power of the Iron King, they probably thought I was their new master, disturbing as that was. I certainly didn't want a hoard of creepy little monsters following me around, laughing and causing trouble. The whole incident put me on edge, and I was eager to get out of the city. "Come on," I said. "I think we should keep moving."

* * *

We continued, heading toward the tower where the huge clock kept watch over the city. Everywhere we went, I could feel the gremlins' eyes on me and hear them skittering in the shadows. Did they want something from me? Or were they just curious? Apart from the gremlins, Mag Tuiredh seemed

devoid of life. But that didn't explain the smoking towers in the distance, or the flashes of Iron glamour I felt all around me.

The farther we ventured into Mag Tuiredh, the more "modern" the city became. Rusty steel buildings sat among the ancient ruins, thick black wires ran over our heads, and neon lights glimmered from the tops of roofs and corners. Smog writhed along the streets and sidewalks, adding an eerie, creepy feel to the dead city. I wondered where all the Iron fey were. Not that I wanted to run into any, but in a city this big, you would think there'd be at least a few.

When we reached the base of the clock tower, I was amazed at how huge it was; a tower of steel and glass and metal, sitting among ancient ruins that were gigantic themselves, looming over them all. But the door to the tower was human-size, bronze and copper and covered with gears that clanked and spun as I wrenched it open.

An endless staircase ran the length of the walls, spiraling up into blackness. Ropes and pulleys dangled from thick metal beams, and monstrous gears spun lazily in the huge expanse of the middle. It was, obviously enough, like being inside a giant clock.

"This way," came Grimalkin's voice, and we followed the cat up the twisting staircase until he vanished somewhere above us. The stairs had no railings, and I hugged the wall as we went higher into the clock, the floor just a shrinking stone square far, far below.

Finally, the staircase ended in a balcony that overlooked the long drop to the bottom. Directly overhead was the wooden ceiling, and in the center of the balcony, a ladder led up to a square trapdoor, the kind you would push on to get into the attic. Puck climbed the ladder, jiggled the trapdoor, and when he discovered it wasn't locked, eased it open so he could peer through the crack. A moment later, he pushed it back all the way and motioned the rest of us up.

A cozy, cluttered room greeted us as we eased through the trapdoor, being careful not to make any noise. The floors and walls were all made of wood, with the far wall showing the back of the enormous clock face. Several tables ran through the room, every square inch of them taken up by timepieces of various sizes and designs. The walls were also covered with them. Cuckoo clocks, grandfather clocks, wooden clocks, sleek metal clocks—you name it, this place had it. All the clock faces showed a different time; none of them were the same. An endless ticking filled the

air, and the occasional tweet, chime, or dong echoed throughout the room. If I stayed here long enough, I would go insane in a very short while.

The Clockmaker, whoever he was, was nowhere to be seen. A stuffed green chair sat in the corner, an island of comfort in the sea of clutter, though at the moment it was far from empty.

A huge, mirror-coated feline lay curled up on the cushion, breathing deeply as if asleep. Definitely not Grimalkin; I recognized the same type of creature that had attacked us on our way to the city. Before I could decide what to do, slitted emerald eyes opened and the cat bolted upright with a snarl.

We drew our swords, the screech of blades nearly drowned out by the sudden booming of a grandfather clock in the corner. The cat hissed and immediately rippled out of sight. I quickly reached for my own magic, trying to see where the cat went, ready to yell out instructions to Ash and Puck. But instead of attacking, the cat-shaped spot of glamour leaped onto a table, miraculously avoiding the many clocks that littered the surface, and bounded from the room, vanishing though a small entrance in the back.

"There you are," said a voice. "Right on time."

A small, hunched creature pushed aside a curtain and came waddling down the rows of tables. He was half my height and wore a bright red vest with several pocket watches adorning the fabric. His head was a cross between human and mouse, with large round ears, bright beady eyes, and a mustache that looked suspiciously like whiskers. A thin, tufted tail swayed behind him as he walked, and a pair of tiny gold glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Hello, Meghan Chase," he greeted, hopping onto a stool and pulling a watch out of his vest, observing it sagely. "It is very good to meet you at last. I would put on a pot of tea, but I'm afraid you have no time to stay and chat. Pity." He blinked at my silence, then must've noticed the wary looks of my companions. "Oh, don't mind Ripple. I keep him around for the gremlins. Nasty little things, gremlins, always getting into the gear heads, throwing everything off. Now, Meghan Chase…" He put his watch away and folded his long fingers to his chest, gazing up at me. "Our time is fading fast. Why have you come?"

I gave a start. "What…don't you know? You already knew my name, and when I was coming."

“Of course.” The Clockmaker twitched his whiskers. “Of *course* I knew what time you would get here, girl. Just as I know what time Goodfellow will knock over my nineteenth-century French mantle clock.” Puck jerked up at this, bumping a table and sending a clock crashing to the floor. “To the second,” the Clockmaker sighed, closing his eyes. Opening them again, he observed me with a piercingly bright gaze, ignoring Puck as he quickly put the clock back on the table, trying to piece it together again. “I see how everything starts, and the exact moment its time runs out. But that was not my question, Meghan Chase. I know why you are here. The question is, do you?”

I shared a look with Ash, who shrugged. “I’m looking for the false king,” I said, wincing as Puck dropped something small and shiny with a curse, sending it rolling across the floor. “Ironhorse said you might be able to help.”

“Ironhorse?” The Clockmaker’s whiskers trembled, and he hopped down from the stool, waddling across the room. “I saw when his clock stopped, when his time finally ran out. He was one of the great ones, though his fate was tied directly to King Machina. When Machina’s seconds trickled away, it was only a matter of time before Ironhorse stopped, too.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat at the thought of Ironhorse. “We need to find the false king,” I said. “Do you know where he is?”

“No.” The Clockmaker sniffed, picking up a bolt and frowning at it. “I do not.”

I blew out my breath in a huff. “Then why are we here?”

“All in good time, my dear. All in good time.” Shooing Puck away from the table, the Clockmaker turned to his work. His long fingers flew over the clock, barely distinguishable blurs, like he was typing something in fast-forward. “I told you, girl, I know the *time* things happen, and when they end. I do not know the reasons why. Nor do I know the location of the false king.” He straightened, fishing in his vest to pull out a white cloth, which he used to polish the once-broken clock. “However, I do know this. You will find him, and find him soon. Your destiny, and the destiny of many others, are shown in the faces of the clocks, ticking away together. So, you see, girl.” He picked up the clock and hopped from the stool, pausing to stare at me with beady eyes. “You already know everything you need to find him.”

I bit down my impatience. This was useless. And every second we wasted here, Puck and Ash's amulets were corroding, succumbing to the poison of the Iron Realm. "Please," I told the Clockmaker, "we don't have much…time. If you say you can help us, do it now so we can be on our way."

"Yes," agreed the Clockmaker, turning to face me fully. "*Now* it is time."

He reached into his vest, and pulled out a large iron key on a silk ribbon. "This is yours," he said solemnly, handing it over. "Keep it safe. Do not lose it, for you will need it soon."

I took the key, watching it spin and dangle in the light. "What is it for?"

"I do not know." The Clockmaker blinked at my frown. "As I said, girl; I only know the *when* of a thing. I do not know the *hows* and *whys*. But I do know this: in one hundred and sixty-one hours, thirteen minutes, and fifty-two seconds, you will need that key."

"A hundred and sixty hours? That's several *days* from now. How am I supposed to keep track?"

"Take this." The Clockmaker reached into the other side of his vest and drew forth a pocket watch, spinning hypnotically on a gold chain. "Everyone should have a time device," he stated as he handed it to me. "I do not know how the oldbloods do it, never worrying about time. I would find it simply maddening. So, I give this to you."

"I…um…appreciate it."

His whiskers twitched. "I am sure you do. Oh, and one last thing. That watch you hold, Meghan Chase? Its life span is drawing to a close. Thirty-two minutes and twelve seconds from the time you use that key, it will cease to run."

I felt a chill in the warm, cozy room. "What does that mean?"

"It means," the Clockmaker said, his beady eyes never blinking as they stared at me, "that in one hundred and sixty-one hours, forty-five minutes, and fifty-eight seconds, something will happen to make that watch stop.

"Now." He smiled at me—at least, I think he did—beneath his whiskers and gave me a slight bow. "I believe our time together has come to an end. Good luck to you, Meghan Chase," he said as he waddled out of the room. "Remember, it ends at the beginning. And give my regards to

the first lieutenant, when you see him." He pushed aside the curtains over the door, slipped through, and was gone.

I sighed. Threading the key through the watch's chain, I looped the whole thing around my neck. "Just once, I'd like it if a faery could give me a straight answer," I muttered as Ash pulled up the trapdoor again. "Seems to me this whole trip was a waste of time, time we don't have. And where the hell is Grimalkin? Maybe he could make some sense of everything, if he didn't keep disappearing every time I turn around."

"I am right here, human." Grimalkin appeared on the chair, curled up much as the larger cat had been. His tail thumped the cushion irritably. "Where I was for much of the conversation. It is not my fault you cannot see past the end of your nose." With an offended air, the cat leaped from the cushion and slipped out the trapdoor, not stopping to look back.

Great, now the cat was mad at me. Knowing Grimalkin, I'd have to beg and plead for him to tell us what he knew, or offer up my firstborn son or something.

Frustrated, I stomped back down the stairs, Ash and Puck trailing behind. Outside, the city glittered with lights, both natural and artificial, but except for the gremlins, chattering and buzzing in the shadows, the streets themselves were empty. I wondered how much time we had lost, coming here. I wondered, despite Grimalkin's assurances, if it had really been necessary.

"Where to now?" Ash mused, looking at me. "Do we have a destination?"

"Yes," I said decisively, almost relieved to be back on track. "The tower."

"The tower? *Machina's* tower?"

I nodded. "That's the only place I know of to find the false king. The Clockmaker said so himself—it ends at the beginning. Everything started with *him.* Machina's tower is where we have to go."

"Sounds good to me," Puck said, crossing his arms. "We have a plan. Finally. So, uh…how do we get there? I don't see any information booths selling maps."

I closed my eyes, trying to remember the Iron King's tower and the path we took to get there. I saw the railroad, cutting straight through a flat obsidian plain, lava pools and smokestacks littering the ground. I

remembered walking down that road with Ash, the sun glaring in our faces, toward the stark black monolith rising in the distance.

"East," I muttered, opening my eyes. "Machina's tower is in the very center of the Iron Realm. If we head east, we should be able to find it."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
ECHOES OF THE PAST

We walked for nearly two days, stopping only to catch a few hours of exhausted sleep before heading eastward again. Following the rising sun, we traveled through a marsh of bubbling oil, where the rusty hulls of cars lay rotting in the sludge, through a forest of street lamps and telephone poles, where strange electrical birds flitted from wire to wire, leaving sparks in their wake. We walked past “the Valley of Worms,” as Puck called it, a gully filled with thousands of discarded computers, crawling with huge worms, some bigger than pythons, their metallic blue hides lit with hundreds of blinking lights and sparks. Thankfully, they seemed blind to, or uncaring of, our presence, but my heart was still pounding against my ribs miles after we left the Valley of Worms behind.

As we traveled, I began to feel a strange pulse from the land, faint at first, but growing stronger the farther we went. As if something was calling to me, drawing me close like the pull of a magnet. And the eerie thing was, if I closed my eyes and really concentrated, I could *feel* the center of the Iron Realm, like an invisible bull’s-eye in my mind. I didn’t mention it to Ash and Puck, unsure if it was just a crazy hunch, but I caught Grimalkin watching me once or twice, glowing cat eyes serious and thoughtful, as if he knew something was going on.

On the second day, we reached the edge of a vast desert, a sea of sand dunes, rising and falling with the wind. I’d never seen the ocean, but I imagined it must be something like this, only with water instead of sand, sprawling and endless, stretching away into the horizon. To our left, a wall of sheer black cliffs soared up over the dunes, and wind-pushed waves crashed against the jagged rocks, spraying dust into the air like sea foam.

“Are you sure we’re still going the right way, princess?” Puck asked, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun. I gazed out over the dunes, squinting in the harsh light, and felt a pulse somewhere on the other side, the beacon that was calling me.

“Yes.” I nodded. “We’re still on track. Let’s keep moving.”

The desert and the cliffs seemed to go on forever. Just walking through the sand proved challenging; though it held our weight, we still sank into the dunes, up to our knees sometimes, as if the desert wanted to swallow us whole. Every so often, the sand hills would be swept away by the wind, revealing what lay beneath. Strange items rose to the surface, like driftwood bobbing in the waves. Everything from socks to pens, forks and spoons, keys, earrings, wallets, Matchbox cars, and an endless amount of coins, were unearthed for just a moment, glinting in the light, before the sand curled over them once more, hiding them from view.

Once, out of curiosity, I bent and scooped a bright pink cell phone out of the sand, flipping it open. Of course, the batteries were long dead, and the screen was dark, but there was a faded sticker on the front, a Hello Kitty with Japanese kanji beneath. I wondered how it got here. It obviously had belonged to somebody at one time. Had they simply lost it?

"Thinking of making a call, princess?" Puck asked as he caught up to me and raised an eyebrow at the phone in my hand. "Reception out here probably sucks. Though, if you do get a signal, try ordering for pizza. I'm starving."

"I see," I said abruptly, making Puck frown in confusion. Gesturing around at the dunes, I continued. "I know where we are, sort of. I'll bet all of these items were lost at one time, in the mortal world. Look at this stuff: pens, keys, cell phones. This is where it all comes, where the lost things finally end up."

"The Desert of Lost Things," Puck said dramatically. "Well, that's appropriate. *We're* here, aren't we?"

"We are *not* lost," I told him firmly, tossing the cell phone away. It hit the sand and was swallowed immediately. "I know exactly where I'm going."

"Oh, good. And here I thought we were taking the scenic route."

"We've got trouble." Ash's curt voice interrupted us. The Winter prince came striding up the dune with Grimalkin trotting behind him, his long fur standing on end. A sudden blast of hot wind tossed his hair and made his cloak snap around him. "There's a storm coming," Ash said, and pointed across the desert. "Look."

I squinted over the dunes. On the horizon, shimmering in the heat, something was moving. As the wind began to howl, filling the air with grocery lists, homework sheets, and baseball cards, I saw a wall of

swirling, glittering sand, eating up the ground as it flowed toward us like an unleashed flood.

"Sandstorm!" I gasped, stumbling backward. "What'll we do? There's nowhere we can really go."

"This way," Grimalkin said, sounding much calmer than I was feeling. A gust of wind tossed sand over his back, and he shook himself impatiently. "We have to get to the cliffs before the main storm arrives, or it could become unpleasant. Follow me."

We headed for the cliffs, fighting the sand and wind that shrieked around us, ripping at clothes and stinging exposed flesh. As the storm drew closer, heavier items began to fly through the air, as well. When a pair of scissors hit me in the chest, skittering off the dragon-scale armor, my blood ran cold. We had to get to shelter quickly, or we'd be sliced to pieces.

The edge of the dust storm roared over me like a tidal wave, screaming in my ears, pelting me with sand and other things. With my eyes squinted nearly closed, I couldn't see where I was going, and dust clogged my nose and mouth, making it hard to breathe. I lost sight of Grimalkin and the others and struggled blindly through the maelstrom, one arm covering my face, the other held out in front of me.

Someone took my hand, pulling me forward. I peeked up and saw Ash, head and shoulders hunched against the wind, dragging me toward the looming cliff wall, a dark curtain in the middle of a stormy sea. Puck was already crouched behind a jagged outcropping, huddled against it as streams of sand flowed around him, bouncing odds and ends off the stones.

"Well, this is fun," Puck said as we ducked behind the rock, huddled together as wind and sand shrieked around us. "It's not every day I get to tell someone I was attacked by a pair of flying reading glasses. Ow." He rubbed his forehead, where a bruise had started to form.

"Where's Grimalkin?" I yelled, peering into the raging wind. A plastic doll head struck the rock inches from my face and went bouncing into the storm, and I cringed back.

"I am here." Grimalkin materialized behind the rock, shaking sand from his coat in a dusty cloud. "There is a small opening in the cliff wall a few yards down," he announced, peering up at me. "I am going there now, if you care to follow. It is more comfortable than cringing against a rock."

Hugging the wall, arms raised to shield our eyes from sand and flying objects, we trailed Grimalkin along the cliff until we reached a narrow crack, a corridor that snaked away into the rock. The opening was tight and narrow, and there wasn't much room to do more than stand, but it was better than being out in the storm.

I squeezed into the corridor, sighing in relief. My ears rang from the shrieking wind, and sand clung to everything: hair, lips, eyelashes. Taking off one gauntlet, I wiped my face, wishing I had a towel, and tried combing the sand from my hair.

"Ugh." Puck shook his head like a dog, sending dust and grit flying. Ash glared at him and moved away from the shower, standing beside me. "Ack. Blech. Oh, great, I'm already starting to itch. I'm going to have sand in every crack for months now."

Grinning at Puck's statement, I reached up and ruffled Ash's hair, sending a rain of dust to the ground. He winced and gave me a rueful look. "I wonder how long the storm will last," I mused out loud, watching sand hurl past the opening. Catching sight of Grimalkin, grooming rigorously on a nearby rock, I called out to him. "Grim? Any ideas?"

The cat didn't even slow down. "Why do you ask me, human?" he asked, licking himself as though his fur was on fire and not just covered in sand. "I have never been here." He shook his head, then moved on to his paws and whiskers. "We could be here for minutes or days—I am no expert of the sand and wind cycles in the Desert of Lost Things." His voice was thick with sarcasm, and I rolled my eyes. "Although," he continued, furiously scrubbing his face, "it might interest you to know there is a tunnel around the corner to the right, half-hidden behind a bush. Perhaps you should see to it that it is empty, and not filled with Iron spiders or something equally unpleasant."

We drew our weapons. Talk about a rock and a hard place. The last thing we wanted was to be trapped in a narrow corridor with an enemy bearing down on us and the storm at our backs. With Ash in front of me and Puck bringing up the rear, we edged forward until we found the tunnel Grim was talking about, a gaping slash in the rock wall, dark and uninviting, like the open mouth of a beast.

Cautiously, Ash poked his sword through the opening, and when nothing immediately leaped out, I eased forward to peer inside.

At first, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, it looked like an ordinary stone tunnel, maybe to a cave system or something similar. But then I saw that the tunnel had been carved out of the rock, that a clump of familiar white mushrooms grew on the wall near the entrance, and an old metal lantern hung on a nail farther in. This wasn't a random cave. Someone had been using these tunnels, and recently.

And suddenly, I knew where we were.

"Princess, wait," Puck warned as I stepped in farther. "What are you doing?"

"I know what this is," I muttered, taking the lantern off the nail. It still had oil, and I coaxed a tiny flame to life, lifting it up. The light glinted off a toy fire engine lying next to a rock, and I had to smile. "Yes," I murmured, bending down to pick up the toy truck. "This is a packrat tunnel. I'm sure of it."

"Pack what?" Puck frowned as he ducked through the opening, still keeping his daggers out as he glared around uneasily. "Rats? Giant iron rats? Oh, thank goodness, that's so much better than spiders."

"No." I glared at him as Ash sheathed his sword and stepped into the tunnel, gazing around cautiously. "Packrats. Little Iron fey that carry mounds of junk on their backs. We met them on our first trip through the Iron Realm, when I was looking for Machina. These tunnels should lead right to their nest."

"Oh. Awesome. That makes me feel *so* much better."

"Will you stop it? They're harmless. And they helped us before." I put down the truck and stepped farther into the tunnel, raising the lantern as high as I could. The burrow snaked away into pitch blackness, but I felt that same odd pull, coming from the dark.

"Where are you going, human?" Grimalkin appeared on a nearby rock, watching me intently. "Do you know the way through these tunnels? It would be highly annoying if we became lost following you."

"I know the way," I said softly, taking a few steps forward, deeper into the burrow. "And if we can find the packrats, they'll be able to help us." Turning around, I saw all three hanging back with varying dubious expressions, and sighed. "I know what I'm doing, guys. Trust me, okay?"

Ash and Puck shared a brief glance, and then Ash pushed himself off the wall to stand beside me. "Lead the way," he said, nodding into the darkness. "We'll be right behind you."

“For the record,” Grimalkin stated as we ventured, single file, into the black, “I do not think this is a good idea. But, as no one listens to the cat anymore, I will have to wait until we are completely lost to say ‘I told you so.’”

* * *

THE TUNNELS WENT ON. Like a giant rabbit warren or termite nest, they twisted and curled their way through the mountain, leading us deep underground. I followed the strange pull, letting it guide me through the seemingly endless maze of burrows, Ash, Puck, and Grim trailing behind. The stone-worked tunnels all looked the same, except for the odd broken toy or piece of junk scattered among the rocks. Several times, we passed through a nexus where multiple channels broke off in different directions. But I always knew which way to go, which tunnel to follow, and didn’t even think much about it, until Grimalkin gave a sudden, irritated hiss.

“*How* are you doing this, human?” he demanded, lashing his tail in agitation. “You have been here only once, and it is impossible for mortals to memorize directions so quickly. How do you know you are going the right way?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered, taking us down yet another side passage. “I just do.”

Puck’s bark of laughter startled me. “See?” he crowed, pointing at Grimalkin, who flattened his ears at him. “You see how irritating that is? Remember that, next time you—hey!” he called as Grimalkin disappeared. “Yeah, I can’t see you, but I know you can still hear me!”

We were getting closer to the packrats’ nest, a fact I knew because of the amount of junk that started appearing in random places: a broken keyboard here, a bicycle horn there. Soon the tunnels were strewn with it, making us watch where we put our feet. Unease gnawed at me; this far in, we should’ve run into a packrat or two. I had been looking forward to meeting them again, wondering if they remembered me. But the tunnels felt empty and cold, abandoned. And they had been that way for a while.

Abruptly, the tunnel fell away, and we stepped into a huge cavern, with mountains of junk piled farther than we could see. Making our way past the enormous trash heaps, I strained my eyes and ears, hoping to catch a glimpse of the packrats, hear them babble in their funny language. But, in

my heart, I knew it was futile. I couldn't sense any spark of life in this place. The packrats were long gone.

"Hey," Puck said suddenly, his voice echoing about the cavern. "Is that…a throne?"

I drew in a sharp breath. A chair made entirely of junk sat atop a smaller mound of rubbish in the center of the room. On a whim, I walked over to the mound and crouched at the foot of the throne, and began sifting through the debris.

"Um…princess?" Puck asked. "What are you doing?"

"Aha!" Straightening, I raised my hand in triumph, brandishing my old iPod. Ash and Puck both gave me confused looks as I tossed the broken device on the mound again. "I just wanted to see if it was still here. We can go now."

"I take it you've been here before," Ash said quietly, nodding to the chair. "And that throne wasn't empty the first time, was it? Who sat there?"

"His name was Ferrum," I replied, remembering the old, old man with silver hair that nearly touched the floor. "He said he was the first Iron King, the one Machina overthrew when he took over. The packrats still worshipped him as king, even though he was terrified of Machina." I felt a faint prick of sadness, staring at the empty seat. "I guess he finally died, and the packrats left when he was gone. I wish I knew where they went."

"There is no time to wonder about that now," Grimalkin said, appearing on the throne cushion, looking disturbingly natural gazing down at us. "This room still stinks of powerful Iron magic. It is corroding your amulets faster than normal. We must press on, or they will stop working right here."

Alarmed, I looked at Ash's crystal and saw he was right. The amulet was nearly black. "Hurry," I said, jogging from the throne room with the boys at my heels, back into the endless labyrinth of stone. "I think we're halfway there."

* * *

A FEW HOURS PASSED, or at least I thought they did—it was so hard to tell time underground—and the fuel in the lantern burned low. We stopped to rest a couple of times, but I found it difficult to stay in one place, becoming

restless and antsy until we started moving again. Puck joked that something must be summoning me again, and I didn't know if he was wrong. Certainly *something* was drawing me, growing stronger and stronger the closer we got, making it impossible to rest or think until we reached our destination.

And when the tunnels finally ended, dropping away into a monstrous precipice spanned by a narrow stone bridge, I knew I was almost there.

"Machina's fortress," I said softly, gazing across the chasm, "is on the other side of the bridge. This is the way I took to reach it. We're almost directly underneath the tower."

Puck whistled, the sound bouncing off the walls. "And, you think the false king will be here, princess?"

"He has to be," I said, hoping my convictions were right. "*It ends at the beginning.* Machina is the one who started it all."

I hoped. Back when I first came here with the packrats, the area below the tower was known as the Cogworks, due to the massive iron gears, cogs, and pistons that clanked and ground their way along the walls and ceiling, making the ground vibrate. The noise had been deafening, as some of the larger gears had been three times my size. Now, everything was silent, the giant gears cracked and broken and strewn about, as if the entire Cogworks had collapsed on itself. Some lay smashed under huge boulders, evidence that the ceiling had fallen in, as well. When Machina died, his tower had crumbled, destroying everything beneath it. I wondered what it would look like on the surface, how much of the Iron King's influence had survived.

Not much, I was afraid.

We made our way over the bridge, where the stone turned to iron grating, and started picking our way through the smashed clockwork, searching for a way up. As I made my way through the rubble, I noticed strange gnarled roots that hadn't been here before, coiled around the gears and dangling from the ceilings. I could feel them pulsing with life.

"Over here," Ash said, waving us over. A bent iron staircase spiraled up from the rubble, ascending toward a metal grate in the ceiling.

I felt a surge of excitement and apprehension. Whatever had been calling me was somewhere overhead. Probably it was the false king and we were walking right into his trap, but I had to see what was up there. The boys drew their weapons, and I pulled my blade, feeling my heart pound in my chest, whether in nervousness or excitement, I couldn't tell. With Ash

leading the way and Puck close at my back, we ascended the stairs to Machina’s tower.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THE RUINS OF THE IRON KING

The last time I pushed open the trapdoor to Machina's tower, I'd been blasted by the heat of a dozen furnaces as I entered the boiler room. In the fiery red glow, dwarves in baggy suits and oxygen masks had shambled back and forth, wielding wrenches and checking leaky pipes. Now, everything was silent, the great furnaces dark and cold. Beams had fallen from the ceiling, pipes were bent and broken, and ash coated everything with a fine gray powder. Those strange roots were also everywhere, snaking in from the ruins above. Through the holes in the ceiling, I could see a section of the tower walls, shiny and metallic.

"Place looks abandoned to me," Puck said, tracing a finger through the dust, drawing a smiley face with the tongue sticking out. "I sure hope this is the right spot, princess."

I glanced up through the ceiling, following the roots until they vanished from sight. "Whatever we're looking for, it's up there. Come on."

Using roots and the pile of rocks, we climbed up one last floor. On solid ground again, I straightened and gazed around at what had been Machina's tower.

It was a mess, a maze of iron beams, broken glass, and crumpled walls. Gears lay scattered about, rusting and broken, wires and cables dangled overhead, and shattered pipes dripped water and oil onto the floor. Numerous suits of armor, bearing the symbol of a barbed-wire crown on the breastplate, were scattered throughout the ruins like toy soldiers. I shivered, imagining rotting skeletons within those metal suits, but Ash kicked a helmet open and found it empty. It seemed Machina's Iron knights followed the same rule as the rest of Faery: when they died, they simply ceased to exist.

Everything was still, as if the very ruins were holding their breath.

"Looks like nobody's home," Puck said, turning in a slow circle. "Hellooooooooo? Anybody here?"

"Be quiet, Goodfellow," Ash growled, peering into the shadows with narrowed eyes. "We're not alone."

“Yeah? How do you figure that, prince? I don’t see anyone.”

“The cait sith has disappeared.”

“…crap.”

Meghan Chase, this way.

A faint glow emitted from the center of the ruins, drawing me to it like a moth to a flame. Without saying anything, I started walking toward it, ducking under beams and around half-standing walls, heading deeper into the maze.

“Princess! Dammit, hold up!”

They scrambled after me, muttering curses, but I barely heard them. It was here, whatever was calling me. It was just ahead…

And then, the walls, ruins, and rubble fell away, revealing an enormous tree in the center of the tower.

The oak soared into the air, massive and proud, the trunk so wide four people couldn’t wrap their arms around it. Its huge branches spread over the tower like a roof, blocking out the open sky. The whole tree glimmered like the edge of a blade, metallic and shiny, leaves flashing in the dim light like tinsel.

“Machina,” I whispered, and stared at the tree in amazement as Puck and Ash finally caught up. “Is it really…could it be?” Easing forward, I walked to the roots of the oak, gazing up at the trunk. Several feet overhead, a stick jutted out of the metal, straight, thin, and—unlike the rest of the tree—made of wood. “There’s the arrow! Oh…oh, wow. This really is him.”

“Wait, Machina was a tree?” Puck scratched the back of his neck. “I’m a little lost here, princess.”

“He turned into a tree when I stabbed him with the Witchwood arrow.” I was close to the former Iron King now, so close I could see my distorted reflection in the trunk. “I never imagined it would survive the tower’s collapse.” On impulse, I reached out and touched it, pressing my palm to the shiny surface.

This is no longer the Iron King, Meghan Chase. I wasn’t really surprised to hear his voice in my head again, though I could feel the power thrumming below my hand. Though the tree was infused with iron all the way to its heart, it wasn’t dying. In fact, it was flourishing. *This oak is only the physical remains of his power, and yours. As I told you before, I am with* you *now.*

“Meghan,” Ash said, his tone full of warning. I stepped back from the tree, breaking the connection, and turned to find we were surrounded.

Iron fey stared back at us from every corner of the ruins, their eyes glowing in the shadows. From what I could tell, most of them had weapons—mostly iron swords and cross-bows, but a few had guns pointed at us, as well.

“Meghan Chase,” said a familiar voice, and Glitch stepped out from behind the crowd, the spines on his head crackling with electricity as he shook his head at me. “What the hell are you doing here?”

* * *

I stared at Glitch, confusion and disappointment spreading through my chest. “Glitch?” I said, and the rebel leader arched an eyebrow. “Why are you here? I thought…this was where the false king lived.”

Glitch snorted. “Are you kidding? The false king wouldn’t come within a hundred yards of this place. This is Machina’s domain still, and everyone knows it.” He crossed his arms, glaring at me with shimmering violet eyes. “But I believe I asked you first, princess. Why are you here? Don’t tell me you came looking for the false king.”

“Yes,” I said. “I came here to kill him.”

Glitch choked, and his spines crackled as the lightning threads flared wildly. “Excuse me?” he burst out. “Let me get this straight. You’re the one thing the false king needs to become unstoppable, and instead of hiding in the mortal world like a sane person, or better yet, letting us guard you and keep you safe, you want to go assault the false king’s forces and take him out yourself.” He shook his head with a snapping sound. “You’re even crazier than I thought.”

“We can do it,” I insisted. “I just need to know where he is.”

“Uh, no, you can’t,” Glitch shot back. “There’s no way I’m telling you his location so you can march happily off to get yourself killed. This is what we’re *going* to do. You and your boyfriends will stay here, safely out of the false king’s reach, while he attacks the Nevernever and depletes his forces a bit. Then we can think about planning a counterstrike, but he’s too powerful to take on right now.”

“We can’t wait,” I insisted. “I can’t let him attack the Nevernever and destroy any more of it. We have to act now.”

“Sorry, your highness, but I don’t think you’re in any position to be giving orders,” Glitch said firmly. “This is my base, and these are my forces. And I’m afraid I can’t let you leave. Like I said before, it would be like handing the victory to the false king. And I tend to be a sore loser. You and the two oldbloods will stay right here.”

“Think you can keep us here by force?” Ash mused in his soft, dangerous voice, scanning the army spread around us. “I can promise you’ll lose a lot of rebels that way, and you need every one you can get.”

“Don’t take me so lightly, prince,” Glitch replied, and his own voice had gone quietly lethal. “There’s a reason I was Machina’s first lieutenant, and you’re in my house now.”

“Really?” Puck pulled his daggers before I could stop him. “Well, I’m placing my bet on the visiting team.” Around us, the rebels tensed, raising their weapons, and Puck shot Ash a savage grin. “Odds are stacked just the way I like ’em. You ready, ice-boy?”

“Stop right there!” My voice echoed around the room, startling everyone, myself included. “This will not, under any circumstances, turn into a fight. We’re on the same freaking side, dammit. Put your weapons away, now.”

Puck blinked at me, astonished, but Ash straightened and calmly slid his sword back in its sheath, diffusing the tension. A collective sigh seemed to go through the chamber as the rebels relaxed and lowered their weapons, as well.

I sighed and turned to Glitch again, who was watching me with an unreadable expression on his face. “Look,” I said, stepping forward, “I know you don’t think I should go anywhere near the false king, but you don’t have to worry. I was the one who defeated Machina, remember? I snuck into this very tower, faced the last Iron King, and stuck an arrow through his heart. That’s why I’m here. Oberon and Mab sent me to deal with the false king—they think I’m the only one who has a chance. I don’t want to fight you, but one way or another, I have to face him. You can either help me, or get out of my way.”

Glitch sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair, making the lightning sizzle. “You have no idea what you’re doing,” he snapped, shaking neon threads from his fingers. “You think you’re ready to take on the false king? All right, then.” He stepped away from the tree, beckoning

us with a hand. “Come with me. Not you two!” he barked, pointing to Ash and Puck. “They can stay here. We’re going for a little ride.”

“I don’t think so,” Ash said calmly, dropping his hand to his sword hilt. I shot him a warning look. Glitch snorted.

“Come off it, prince,” he said in a weary voice. “You really think I would hurt her? I’m the one who doesn’t want her running off on a suicide mission. Now that she’s exactly where I wanted her to be in the first place, you think I’d jeopardize that? Your princess will be perfectly safe under my care. And trust me, she’s going to want to see this.”

“I have no reason to trust anything you say,” Ash stated flatly. The rebel leader threw up his hands.

“Fine,” he snapped. “You want an oath out of me, is that it? Here it is, then. I, Glitch, last lieutenant of King Machina, promise to keep Meghan Chase safe from harm, and to bring her safely back to the paranoid care of her guardians. Is that good enough for you?”

“What about Puck and Ash?” I added.

“Nor will my forces do them any harm, as well. Are we quite done here?” Glitch shot me an exasperated look. “I would think you’d want to see this, princess, since you’re so eager to get to the false king.”

I glanced at Ash and Puck. “I’ll be all right,” I said, raising a hand to cut off Puck’s protest. “If Glitch says this is important, I should go.”

“I don’t like it.” Puck crossed his arms and gave the rebel leader a dubious glare. “It’s not that I don’t trust the guy, but…no, wait—that’s *exactly* the reason. Are you sure you want to do this, princess?”

I nodded. “I’m sure. You two stay here, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“One more thing,” Ash said in his dangerous, soft voice as we turned away, and Glitch shot him a wary look. “If you do not return with her,” Ash continued, staring him down, “if she comes to any harm while she is with you, I will turn this entire camp into a bloodbath. That is *my* promise, lieutenant.”

“I’ll bring her back, prince,” Glitch snapped, and there was the faintest hint of fear in his voice now. “I gave you my word, and I’m bound to uphold it, same as you. Try not to slaughter any of my people while we’re gone, okay?”

“Where are we going?” I asked as we turned away. Glitch gave me a humorless smile.

“I’m going to show you what you’re up against.”

* * *

He took me up a flight of stairs to a part of the tower that hadn't completely crumbled, where an open landing trembled and swayed in the wind. Far below, the flat obsidian plain stretched away into the horizon, spiderwebbed with orange lava and dotted with metallic trees. Overhead, the sky was clear save for a few ragged clouds, and the crimson moon winked at us like an evil red eye.

Glitch walked to the edge of the landing, gazing out over the Iron Realm, his face turned to the sky. "Sky's clear, good." He spun to face me, smirking. "No clouds now, but a storm can sweep in quickly, so we have to move fast. Don't want to be caught in the rain without an umbrella, I can tell you that."

"How are we going to get there?" I asked, peering cautiously over the edge at the blackened plain stretched out below us.

Glitch smiled at me. "Fly."

A buzzing filled the air. I looked straight up to see a pair of long, segmented creatures spiraling down at us, and leaped back as they perched on the edge of the landing.

I tried not to cringe, but it was hard. The creatures looked like a cross between a hang glider and a dragonfly, with bulging insect eyes and six copper legs that gripped the railing with tiny claws. Their bodies were thin and shiny, though their wings looked more batlike than insect, made for gliding instead of speed. And they had propellers on their rear ends.

Glitch looked annoyingly pleased with himself. "These are gliders," he told me, enjoying my uneasiness. "Just walk to the edge of the platform and spread your arms and they'll crawl into position. You steer them by pulling on their front legs and shifting your body weight. Easy enough, right?" I stared at him in disbelief, and he chuckled. "After you, your highness. Unless you're scared, of course."

"Oh, of course not," I drawled sarcastically, taking a cue from Puck. "Big giant insect thing holding me several hundred feet in the air? What's there to be nervous about?"

Glitch leered and offered no comment. Taking a deep breath to calm my pounding heart, I walked to the edge and looked down. That was a mistake. Steeling myself for the inevitable, I spread my arms.

A moment later I felt creepy jointed legs gripping my clothes as one of the insects crawled up my back, shockingly light for something that big. I clenched my teeth and tried not to flail as the legs curled under me, forming a kind of hammock. Overhead, the wings buzzed and fluttered, awaiting takeoff, but we didn't move. I looked down at the dizzying drop, and my stomach spun so violently I was afraid I'd throw up any second.

"Uh, you're going to have to fall forward, princess," Glitch said helpfully. I would've turned to glare at him if I hadn't been terrified to move.

"Yeah, I'm getting to that." Closing my eyes, I took deep short breaths, preparing for the drop. I would never take up bungee jumping, that much was certain. "Okay," I whispered, trying to psyche myself up. "On three. Here we go. One…two…three!"

Nothing happened. My mind said jump, but my body refused to fall. I teetered on the edge of the landing, the wind whipping my hair, and felt sick. "I don't know if I can do this," I said, as my glider gave an irritated buzz. "Hey, don't judge me. How do I even know this is sa—ahhhh!"

Something nudged me from behind, just enough to make me lose my balance. Shrieking like a bean sidhe on a roller coaster, I fell forward.

For a moment, I couldn't open my eyes, certain I was going to die. The wind whipped around me, howling in my ears as I seemed to plummet straight to my death. Then the glider curved upward, leveling out as it caught the wind currents. As my heart slowed and my death grip on the glider's legs eased a bit, I cautiously opened my eyes and looked around.

The land stretched out before me, flat and infinite, fractured with glowing threads of lava vanishing into the horizon. From this height, the Iron Realm didn't look quite so ominous. The wind shrieked in my ears and whipped at my hair, but I wasn't afraid. Experimentally, I tugged on the glider's front leg, and it instantly swerved to the right. I pulled on the other leg and it swooped to the left, sending a thrill coursing through me. I wanted to go faster, higher, to find a flock of…something…and race them into the sun. How had I been afraid of this? This was easy; this was awesome! The glider buzzed in excitement, as if sensing my mood, and I would've sent it into a steep dive if a voice hadn't stopped me.

"Exhilarating, isn't it, princess?" Glitch had to shout to be heard as his glider swooped down next to mine. The lightning in his hair snapped

wildly, trailing threads of energy behind him. “First time on a glider, and you’ll never want to walk again.”

“You couldn’t have let me jump on my own?” I yelled, glaring at him. He laughed.

“I could have. But we would’ve been standing there till the sun came up.” Glitch pulled on his glider’s legs, and the insect swooped skyward, rolled, and came down on my other side. “So, your highness, you seem to be getting the hang of this, no pun intended. Want me to show you what these can really do? That is, if you’re not afraid of a little challenge.”

My adrenaline was pumping, and the thrill of flying made my blood soar. I was annoyed at the Iron faery and up for a challenge, little or not. “You’re on!”

Glitch grinned, and his eyes sparked. “Follow me, then. And try to keep up!”

His insect shot skyward, his whoop ringing out behind him. I yanked my glider’s front legs back, and it followed instantly, shooting up like a bottle rocket. Glitch banked sharply to the right; I pulled the glider’s right leg, and it performed the same maneuver, sweeping around in a lazy arc. We chased Glitch across the open sky, through a series of loops, arcs, curves, and dives, all at top speed. The ground rushed beneath me, the wind howled in my ears, and my blood raced faster than it ever had before. I pushed my glider into a steep, vertical dive, pulling up at the last second. My adrenaline surged, and I whooped with sheer, unrestrained joy.

Finally, we caught up to Glitch again, back to flying in a normal, straight line. He shot me a grudging look as I joined him, still panting from the thrill of stunt gliding an insect. “You’re a natural,” he said, shaking his head. “The gliders don’t perform that well for just anyone. You have to bond for it to really give you its all. Guess you made an impression.”

I was absurdly pleased at the compliment, and had the strange impulse to pat my glider on the head. “How much longer to where we’re going?” I asked, noticing that the huge red moon above us was beginning to set. Glitch sighed, and his playful mood vanished.

“We’re almost there. In fact, you should start to see it…now.”

We soared over a rise, the land dropping away into a shallow basin, and I saw the forces of the false king for the first time.

They covered the ground in a glimmering carpet, a small city's worth of Iron fey, marching forward in perfectly square sections. The army was massive, easily twice the size of the forces of Summer and Winter. Great iron beetles, like the ones we saw in the earlier attack, lumbered forward like tanks, overshadowing the ranks of smaller fey. I counted at least three dozen of them, and remembered how hard it was to bring down just one of the massive bugs. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Behind the army, creeping forward at an impossible rate, was a massive iron fortress. I blinked, rubbing my eyes, wondering if I was hallucinating. It was impossible. Something that size should not be able to move. But yet, there it was, rolling after the army, a huge structure of iron and steel. It was lopsided and uneven, looking cobbled together from whatever was lying around, but somehow shaped into a monstrous moving citadel.

"He's been gathering his forces for a while," Glitch said as I stared at the fortress, unable to take my eyes from it. "Those skirmishes at the edge of the Nevernever? Just a distraction, something to weaken the other side while he gathers his strength. At the rate he's going, he'll reach the edge of the Iron Kingdom in a little under a week. And when he plows through the Nevernever with that fortress and the full might of his army behind it, none of the oldbloods will be able to stop him. First he'll take out the courts, and then he'll plant that castle in the middle of your precious Nevernever to finish it off. Faery will be converted to Iron in a matter of days.

"So, your highness," Glitch said, as we wheeled our gliders around, retreating from the army and the fortress of death that followed. My excitement had fled, replaced with sheer fright and a nagging despair. "What do you expect to do against *that?*"

I had no answer for him.

* * *

THE REBELS HAD CONVERTED part of Machina's tower into their underground base. Though much of it still remained a ruin, enough had been cleared out for us to be given separate quarters. Glitch showed us a set of rooms we could use—small and windowless, with a rough stone floor—and said he would leave them unlocked for the time being.

“You can roam the tower grounds all you like, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t leave the ruins,” he said, pushing open the door to another identical room, furnished with only a cot, a lamp, and an upside-down barrel that served as a table. “You’re our guests, of course, but be warned that I’ve given specific orders to keep you from leaving the tower, by force if necessary. Not that I want a fight. I’d much rather things be civil between us.”

“Yeah, good luck with that, socket-head,” Puck sneered, and I was too tired to argue. Glitch needn’t have worried; I wasn’t planning any grand escape. There was no place for us to go. We couldn’t get to the false king through that huge army, and even if we did, we’d have to somehow find a way into that moving fortress, which would certainly be heavily guarded. I was at a loss. Asking Glitch and the rebels to charge the false king’s forces would be suicide, but if we didn’t do something quickly, that castle would reach the battlefront and then it would be game over.

Ash moved close, putting a hand on my shoulder, his eyes bright with concern. “Don’t worry about Glitch, or the castle,” he said in a low voice, so that only I could hear. I’d told him about the army and the Iron fey and the moving fortress the moment I came back with Glitch, and the Winter prince had nodded grimly but didn’t seem terribly concerned about it. “Nothing is impenetrable. We’ll think of something.”

“Really? ’Cause I’m feeling a bit outgunned at the moment.” I sighed and leaned into him, closing my eyes. Puck and Glitch were throwing insults and challenges at each other a few yards away, but it didn’t seem terribly serious so I wasn’t going to worry about it. “How are we supposed to get in that thing?” I whispered. “Or even get close? There’s no force big enough to stand against that huge army. And by the time they reach the wyldwood it’ll be too late.”

“We have a little time.” Ash’s voice, low and soothing, flowed over me. “And you haven’t really slept since we left Leanansidhe’s. Get some rest. I’ll be right outside the door.”

“You’re always—” the statement was interrupted by a huge yawn “—telling me to rest,” I finished, deliberately ignoring the irony. Ash snorted, and I frowned, poking him in the chest. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“I know,” he replied, steering me toward the room. “But you also have this tendency to push yourself beyond the limits of your endurance, and

you don’t notice until you fall over from exhaustion.” He escorted me over the threshold, smiling as I glowered at him. “As your knight, I’m entitled to point these things out. Part of the job description when you asked me.”

“Yeah, right,” I muttered, crossing my arms. Ash smiled.

“I don’t lie, remember?” He stepped into the room, bent down, and brushed a featherlight kiss to my lips, making my insides melt. “I’ll be close. Try to get some rest.” He closed the door, leaving me with a growing ache that wouldn’t go away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
RAZOR

Tired as I was, it was hard to sleep. I lay on the lumpy, uncomfortable cot and stared at the ceiling, my thoughts swirling too furiously to rest. I thought about the false king and his moving fortress, of the armies of Summer and Winter camped on the edge of the Iron Realm, oblivious to the danger. I tried formulating ways to stop the moving citadel and the huge army bearing down on the camps, but my plans looped in crazy, complicated circles or were too suicidal to take seriously.

But mostly, I thought of Ash, who kept invading my thoughts every few seconds. I wanted him here with me, alone in this little room with the door locked, but at the same time I didn't know if I was ready. Several times, I thought about opening the door and dragging him back inside with me, but would that be too forward? Would he think it inappropriate, considering where we were? Or was he waiting for me to make the first move? He had said he would wait for me, right?

I must've drifted off, because the next thing I knew, something landed on my stomach, and I bolted upright with a yelp, throwing it off.

"Ouch," exclaimed a raspy voice, and a gremlin leaped from the floor to the edge of the cot, regarding me with electric green eyes. "Found you!" it exclaimed, and I yelled.

Ash burst into the room a millisecond later, sword already drawn, ready to attack whatever had ambushed me. Seeing the gremlin, he tensed, and I threw my hand up, stopping him before he could lunge.

"Ash, wait!" He paused, scowling, and I turned to the gremlin, which was now in a defensive crouch, hissing and baring its teeth at Ash. "Did… did you just talk?" I stammered. "You spoke, right? I didn't just imagine it?"

"Yes!" it exclaimed, bouncing up and down, its ears flapping like sails. "Yes, you hear me! Razor found you! Found girl and funny dark elf."

"Razor," I repeated, as Ash stared at us in complete bewilderment. "Is that your name?"

“You can understand it?” Ash said, frowning at the gremlin, who snarled and scuttled up the wall, hanging there like an enormous spider. “The creature is actually talking to you?”

I nodded and looked back at the gremlin, which was now gnawing on one of its huge ears and still glaring at Ash. “When did you guys learn to talk?”

The gremlin blinked at me. “We talked,” it stated, cocking its head as if confused. “Always talked. No one hears us, though. Except the Master.”

I winced. Even though I had suspected for a while now, to have a gremlin actually confirm it was disturbing. They listened to me because they thought I was their new master. I was at a loss. Not long ago, I thought the gremlins mindless and animalistic, cunning but lacking any sort of language or society. To hear one speak was more than a little surprising.

I looked down at Razor, beaming up at me, hanging on my every word. I certainly had no idea what to do with a gremlin. “How did you get in here?” I asked instead.

“Followed!” The spindly creature grinned, flashing his neon-blue, razor-sharp teeth. Its voice buzzed like a bad radio station. “Brothers say they see you at old city. Razor followed. Followed you here. Found you!”

“What does it want?” Ash muttered, frowning as the gremlin cackled and scurried to the ceiling, hanging upside down as it swayed from side to side.

“I don’t know.” I looked up at the gremlin. “Razor, why did you follow me? What do you want?”

“Food!” the gremlin crowed. “Razor smells food! Hungry!” Hissing, he scuttled across the ceiling, zipped out the open door and vanished into the ruins.

Ash sighed and sheathed his blade. “Are you all right?” he asked. “It didn’t hurt you, did it?”

I shook my head. “I can understand them,” I said, wondering what to do with this new revelation. Standing, I walked to the door, peering out at the ruins. Lights flickered erratically, and a faint hum filled the air, the buzz of machines and electricity. “They think I’m their master now, Ash,” I said, leaning against the door frame. “Like Machina was. I guess… because I have his power, they think they should follow me.”

“Interesting.” Ash’s thoughtful voice made me glance back. I was half expecting him to be worried or disgusted with the whole talking to gremlins thing. But the look in his eyes was one of intrigue, not contempt. “I wonder what you could do,” he mused, “with all the gremlins under your command.”

A sudden commotion somewhere in the ruins drew my attention. “Gremlin!” someone shouted, accompanied by much cursing. “We have a gremlin! Get away from those wires, you little—hell.” The lights sputtered and went out, plunging the ruins into blackness. “Glitch! It just ate through the electrical cables!”

“Get the backup generator going!” Glitch’s voice cut through the commotion. “Diode, see if you can reconnect the lights. And someone catch that gremlin!”

Puck appeared, fading out of the shadows, yawning and scrubbing his hair. “Sounds like they’ve got a little pest problem.” He grinned as the lights flickered and struggled to come back on. Ash glared at him.

“Where’ve you been, Goodfellow?”

“Me? Oh, I’ve been scouting the compound, chatting to the natives, exploring possible escape routes, you know, useful stuff.” Puck scratched his nose and leered at Ash. “What’ve *you* been doing all night, ice-boy?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

I sighed, loudly, before they could start insulting each other. “Has anyone seen Grimalkin yet?”

“Nope, but you know our furry friend.” Puck shrugged and leaned against the wall. “He’ll show up when we least expect him, being all cool and mysterious. I wouldn’t worry about the furball.” The lights flickered once and finally stayed on. Puck rolled his eyes. “You know, if we ever wanted to cause a lot of havoc, we’d just have to find a dozen gremlins and turn them loose. Those things make more trouble than me. Almost. So, princess.” He turned to me, and his voice dropped to a murmur. “Any idea of when we’re getting out of here?”

“I don’t know, Puck.” I shook my head. “I don’t exactly have a plan, yet. We have to somehow get around that huge army, sneak into the castle, find the false king, and take him out, all before he reaches the wyldwood.”

“Sounds pretty impossible to me,” Puck grinned. “When do we start?”

“Start what?” And Glitch came around the corner, eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I hope you’re not planning to start anything with the false

king, because if you are, let me say again how stupid and impossible that is. Also, I'm not going to let you deliver yourself right into his hands, princess. You'll have to get through me before you go off on any suicide missions. Just letting you know. So please…" He smiled at me, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Behave yourselves. For all our sakes."

"What do you want, Glitch?" I asked, before Ash and Puck said anything that would get us thrown in rebel jail. Not that I didn't doubt our ability to fight our way free, but I didn't want needless bloodshed from those who were supposedly allies. Even though I knew it would probably come to that eventually. Neither of the boys did well in forced captivity, and we would have to go after the false king soon, planned or not. I couldn't let him reach the wyldwood and destroy everything.

"Just wanted to let you know, if you haven't guessed already, that there's a gremlin running around the base. They're not dangerous, usually, but they'll make a nuisance of themselves by chewing on wires and short-circuiting any equipment we have. So if the lights flicker, or if something stops working abruptly, you can thank our little friend."

Puck snickered. "It gives me all kinds of hope knowing your highly trained forces can't track down one teensy little gremlin."

"You think you can do better, you try finding the thing." Glitch glared at Puck, and his spines bristled, before turning to me. "Anyway, here." He handed me a bag. "Thought you might be hungry. Since you're our guests, it would be impolite if we didn't share our food with you. That's your rations for the week. Try to make it last." At my surprised look, he rolled his eyes. "Not all of us live on oil and electricity, you know."

"What about Ash and Puck?"

"Well, I'm *pretty* sure eating our food won't melt their insides to gooey paste. But you never know."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

The lights flickered again, and a voice yelled for Glitch somewhere overhead. Sighing, Glitch excused himself and hurried away, calling instructions. I wondered if I should be helping the rebels try to catch the gremlin, since it was my fault Razor was here, but then decided it was Glitch's problem now. He wasn't willing to help us or let us go, so he could deal with the trouble it caused.

At the mention of food, I realized I hadn't eaten anything since the night before, and my stomach grumbled. Opening the bag, I found several

cans of processed meat, beans, fruit cocktail, a tube of squeezy-cheese with crackers, and a six-pack of diet soda. There was also a stack of paper bowls and a handful of plastic spoons.

Peering into the bag over my shoulder, Puck made a disgusted noise. “Of course, all their food would be wrapped in those stupid cans. What’s so great about preservatives, I ask you? Why can’t humans just be happy with an apple?”

I glanced over my shoulder and sighed. “I take it you’re not going to eat anything while we’re here?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, stop griping then, and let’s find a place to eat.” Closing the bag, I started down the hallway, looking for some privacy. My room was the logical place, but I felt cramped and claustrophobic in that tiny space and wanted to see the open sky.

“Fine, princess.” Ash and Puck followed me up the stairs into the ruins above. “But if I get sick, I expect you to wait on me hand and foot.”

“If you get sick, I’ll just have Ash put you out of your misery.”

“I’m touched that you care.”

The tower was buzzing tonight as scores of rebels scurried back and forth, trying to repair the damage one lone gremlin had caused. I felt a nasty glow of satisfaction as I watched them, and a strange pride that I had caused this. Well, that my gremlin had caused this. What good were they, these rebels, if all they did was hide from the false king in the hopes that someone else cleaned up the mess?

And when did I start thinking of the gremlin as mine?

Despite the activity in the tower, the space around the great oak was quiet and still. I felt drawn to it, just as I was the first night we came here. Beneath the towering limbs, nestled in a circle of roots at the base of the trunk, I sat down and started pulling out rations.

Ash and Puck looked on warily until I waved a plastic spoon at them. “Sit,” I ordered, pointing to the roots. “I know this isn’t faery wine, but it’s all we’ve got and we have to eat something.” Dumping a can of fruit cocktail into a paper bowl, I passed it to Ash. He took it and perched gingerly on the edge of a root.

Puck sat and gazed mournfully into the bowl I handed him. “Not an apple slice to be found,” he sighed, picking through the gooey mess with

his fingers. “How can mortals even pass this off as fruit? It’s like a peach farmer threw up in a bowl.”

Ash picked up the spoon, gazing at it like it was an alien life form. Dropping it back into his untouched food, he placed the bowl on the ground and stood.

“Ash.” I looked up from my cold beans. “What are you doing?”

“It’s watching us.” Very casually, his hand went to his sword hilt. “Very close this time. It feels—” he closed his eyes, and I saw a shimmer of glamour around him “—like it’s right above us.”

He whirled, blindingly quick. There was a flash of blue light as he hurled something at the tree, and a second later a high-pitched squeal rang out as something dropped from the branches, nearly landing in my lap.

I jumped up. It was a big metal insect of some sort, shiny and wasplike, its wings still buzzing faintly as it died. Our mysterious stalker, finally brought into the open. An ice shard had gone clean through its body, ripping it apart, but its hooked legs clutched something long and slender. Bending down, avoiding the needlelike stinger on the end, I wrenched the object from the creature’s grasp.

It was a stick, a branch with several leaves sprouting along the wood. The wood was still alive, though the leaves were flecked with iron, and shiny threads ran along the length. A note was wrapped around the stick, and as I pulled it off, Ash gently took the branch from me, narrowing his eyes.

“Do you know what this is?” he murmured.

Puck smirked. “Uh, yes, actually. In most circles, it’s called a stick. Used for starting fires, poking large insects, and playing fetch with your dog.”

Ash ignored him. “It’s the branch from a rowan tree,” he said, meeting my gaze. “And, given the circumstances, I don’t think it’s a coincidence. He knows we’re here. He sent this directly to you.”

My blood ran cold. “You think he’s out there?”

“I’m sure of it. Read the message.”

I unrolled the note, feeling my stomach clench as I scanned the words. *The Iron King has a proposal for you. Find me.*

Peering at the note upside down, Puck scowled. “Find him? Like we’re going to drop everything and tromp all over the Iron Realm looking for him? You’re not thinking of actually meeting him, are you, princess?”

“I think I should,” I said slowly, looking at Ash. “He might know of something that we can use against the false king. Or, maybe the false king is offering to end the war.”

“Or it could be a trap, and Rowan will betray us like he did all of Faery.” Ash’s voice was cold.

“That might be, but I still think we should see what he wants. What he’s offering.” I looked around at the dozens of rebels moving about the ruins. “But first, we need to find a way out of here. You heard Glitch—he’s not going to let us walk out the front door.”

“Finally.” Puck grinned, rubbing his hands together. “I thought we were never going to get out of here. So what’s your pleasure? Diversion? Fight? Sneaking out the back door?”

“Before we bring the entire camp down on our heads,” Ash said, handing me the branch, “perhaps we should figure out where Rowan is first.”

“Oh, right. That would make sense, wouldn’t it?” I stared at the note, wishing yet again that faeries would just say what they meant without making it into a riddle. “I wish Grim were here. He’d know where to find Rowan.” I felt a sudden stab of guilt for not thinking of the cat until now. “You think he’ll be all right? Should we try to get him a message?”

“Too risky.” Ash shook his head. “We could draw suspicion to ourselves, and besides, no one but us knows the cait sith is here. That might prove useful later on, having an ally no one else is aware of.”

“Grim can take care of himself, princess,” Puck agreed, eager to get started. “It’s what he’s best at, after all. So, the question is, how do we figure out where the stick came from?”

I looked around and saw a skinny hacker elf walking through the ruins, carrying an armful of keyboards and wires. “Easy. We just ask.”

“Excuse me!” I called, jogging up to the elf, who jumped and gave me a nervous look over the tangle of computer wires. His huge black eyes, with lines of green numbers scrolling across, whirled anxiously. “Diode, right? I was wondering if you could help me.”

The hacker blinked, shuffling his feet. “Glitch has informed us that we are not to engage you oldbloods in verbal communication,” he said in a nasal voice.

“I just have a question.” I smiled at him, hoping to make him less nervous. It only succeeded in making him squirm more. Sighing, I held up

the rowan branch. “I found this by the oak tree. Do you know what it is?”

Diode narrowed his eyes. “That is a *sorbus aucuparia*, more commonly known as a European mountain ash, or rowan tree. Yes, most of the natural flora and fauna has since been overtaken by ferrous influences, but there are a few places where you can find them still clinging to their natural state.”

I understood only half of what he was saying, but got the general idea. “Where?” I asked, and Diode blinked again.

“The nearest stand of *sorbus aucuparia* is two point seven miles due west from the tower,” he said, nodding in the general direction. “Of course, you won’t be able to see it, being forbidden to leave the compound and all. Oh my!” He stepped back from me, and his eyes whirled. “You’re not planning to escape, are you? Glitch will find out, and the trail would lead back to me, and I’d be an accomplice to a crime. Please tell me you’re not planning an escape.”

“Relax, I’m not planning an escape.” Not entirely a lie, since he just told me to tell him that, rather than asking me if I was. But it must’ve worked, because he breathed a relieved sigh and relaxed.

“Well, that’s nice, but I have to get back to work.” The hacker elf backed up, nearly tripping over his own feet, and gave me a shaky smile. “I have to…be somewhere else now. It was…um…goodbye.” Clutching his cables, he fled into the ruins.

“Did you two hear that?” I asked as Puck and Ash appeared behind me. Ash made a thoughtful noise and crossed his arms.

“Three miles due west,” he murmured, gazing after the fleeing elf. “Not far, but do you think it’s wise to let him go? He might run straight to Glitch.”

“Then we should move fast.” I checked my sword and my armor, making sure all were in place. “We’re getting out of here, now.”

Puck’s eyes gleamed. “Need a spectacular diversion of some sort, princess?” he asked.

“No, let’s not burn any bridges before we have to.” I started into the ruins, looking for a certain flight of stairs that would take us where we needed to go. “We might want to come back here, and I don’t want to fight a horde of angry rebels because you blew up their base or something. We’re sneaking out nice and quiet.”

“Um, but if we’re sneaking out, shouldn’t we be looking for the back door?”

“Hide.” Ash suddenly grabbed my arm and pulled me behind a pillar, crushing me to his chest, as Puck dove behind a rock pile. A split second later, Glitch appeared on the far side of the room, with Diode at his heels.

“I don’t know, sir,” Diode was saying. “But it seemed suspicious. You don’t think she’s planning an escape, do you? She told me she wasn’t.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Glitch said. I could feel Ash’s heart against my palm, though he had gone perfectly still, hardly breathing. “You haven’t met a human in your life, Diode, so you don’t know that they’re all capable of lying through their teeth.”

Diode gasped, and Glitch blew out a long breath, running his hands through his spines. “It might not be anything,” he said, as they continued walking. I held my breath as they passed behind our pillar. “But go ahead and find her, all the same. The last thing we want is that girl throwing herself under the false king’s wheels.”

“Of course, sir.” Their voices faded as they continued into the ruins and out of sight.

Puck popped up from behind the rubble. “If we’re gonna leave, we should do it soon. Like, now. Before socket-head figures it all out.”

“This way,” I hissed, and we hurried on.

After a few more close calls, I finally saw the base of the stairs to the tallest landing, the one that gazed out over the plateau. Unfortunately, it was also guarded by a burly dwarf with a mechanical arm and an iron-tipped spear. Several hacker elves crouched nearby, repairing wires and other electronics.

“Want me to take them out?” Ash muttered as we crouched in the shadows.

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be noisy at all,” Puck whispered back. I glared at the dwarf and the Iron fey, the only obstacles to reaching our destination.

And then, I saw the glint of a glowing green eye in the ruins above, the curve of a neon smile. *Razor! He would distract them, I bet. If I could just make him hear me…*

As if reading my mind, the gremlin suddenly turned and looked right at us.

I caught my breath. *Well, why not? Razor, if you can hear this, I need to get past that dwarf onto the stairs. Could you maybe cause a diversion*

or someth—

The gremlin grinned madly, and then with a screech that sounded almost maniacal, scuttled from his hiding place in a flurry of sparks, drawing the attention of everything in the room. Laughing, he dangled overhead, seeming to mock them all, before zipping out of sight. Shouts and curses filled the ruins as the rebels, dwarf included, dropped everything to pursue the gremlin.

"Well, that's convenient," Puck mused. "I really need to get a few of those things."

"Come on," I snapped, and we bolted up the stairs, still hearing the shouts of the rebels below as Razor led them on a wild-goose—or gremlin—chase. We reached the landing without opposition, the wind whipping my hair as we stepped onto the ledge.

Puck gave me a look of mock-alarm as I gazed up the tower wall, searching for our way out. "Um, how exactly were you planning on getting out this way, princess? Fly?"

"Yes." I finally spotted what I was looking for, hanging off the wall near the very top, a cluster of gliders sleeping in the sun. I whistled softly, and they roused themselves, turning their insect heads to peer down at us.

Puck, following my gaze, made a revolted noise in the back of his throat. "You're kidding me. You want us to fly out of here on those things? Um…how about I just turn into a bird and follow you—"

"No. You heard what Mab said." I beckoned to the gliders, and they buzzed sleepily. "Using glamour could shatter your amulet. We want to conserve it as much as possible."

Puck grimaced. "I think I might make an exception for this, princess. Not that I don't enjoy the thought of being carried around by a big metal bug, but…" He backed up a step as the gliders began crawling down the wall. "Oh, wonderful. They're looking at me weird, princess."

"What's the matter, Goodfellow?" Ash smirked, crossing his arms as the gliders landed on the platform, watching us with huge, multifaceted eyes. "Afraid of a few bugs?"

"Bugs are creepy." Puck made a face at one of the gliders, wincing as it buzzed at him. "Giant metal bugs that look at me weird belong in horror flicks." He sneered at Ash. "Besides, I don't see *you* stepping up to the plate, prince."

"I just want to make this moment last as long as I can."

“Guys! There’s no time for this!” I glared at them, and they stopped, looking guilty. “This is our only way out. Just follow my lead and do what I do.”

I walked to the edge of the landing and looked down. Yesterday, gazing at that vast drop made my stomach want to crawl up my throat. Now, my heart raced with excitement, and I spread my arms.

For a moment, nothing happened, and I was afraid the gliders wouldn’t respond, after all. But then I heard the familiar buzz of wings, and a second later the glider landed on my shoulders, curling its copper legs around me.

“Creeeeeepy,” Puck sang. I turned to glare at him.

“Shut up and listen. You use the front legs to steer. Try to relax and you’ll be fine.” I ignored Puck’s dubious look and faced forward again. “Here we go,” I muttered, and dove off the edge.

The wind caught the glider’s wings and sent us both shooting upward, and my adrenaline soared in response. I thought I heard Puck’s yell of disbelief as I spiraled up, and grinned wildly, imagining his face if I showed him what the glider could really do. But there was no time for the crazy dives and aerial maneuvers of the night before, though I could feel the glider’s excitement as well, like a flighty racehorse eager to run. I did a couple of backward loops, just to get it out of our systems, before circling back to see if the boys needed further encouragement. To my surprise both Puck and Ash had managed to take off, and both were gliding toward me, though Puck did look a bit green as I pulled alongside them.

“Are you two all right?” I called, trying not to grin. Puck gave me a weak thumbs-up.

“Fabulous, princess!” His glider buzzed loudly, and he winced. “Though I’d much rather be flying on my own wings. This isn’t natural. Which way from here?”

Ash pointed toward the distant horizon. “Due west is that way,” he said, and I nodded. Without even waiting for me to steer it, my glider abruptly veered off to the right, and we set a course for Rowan and the setting sun.

CHAPTER NINETEEN
ROWAN'S PROPOSAL

After several minutes of flying, I spotted a dark blot shimmering like a mirage on the otherwise flat landscape. As we drew closer, I saw that it was a stand of trees, still alive, an oasis in the middle of the blasted wasteland. But circling overhead, I also saw that they were dying, their trunks streaked with metal and most of their leaves already bright and metallic. A few sparse limbs bore leaves that were still alive, and they matched the branch I'd found at the rebel base. This was our rowan stand, all right. If the note was to be trusted, Ash's traitor brother was here.

We landed our gliders, which buzzed anxiously about being left, and entered the grove cautiously, weapons drawn. The trees shivered in the wind, metallic branches scraping together like knives, making chills run up my spine.

Rowan stepped out of the trees ahead, a lean figure in white, his horribly burned face making my stomach clench. Two Iron knights flanked him, their jointed, segmented armor bearing a new symbol. Instead of a barbed-wire crown, the symbol of an iron fist now adorned their breastplates, punching up toward the sky. One of the knights was a stranger, unfamiliar to me. But I recognized the second immediately; the face above the breastplate could've been Ash's, except for the scar marring his cheek and the deadness in his gray eyes.

"Whoa, I'm seeing double," Puck muttered, blinking rapidly. "Long-lost brother of yours, ice-boy? Were you separated at birth or something?"

"That's Tertius," I whispered as we continued to approach. "He was with Ironhorse the first time we went into the Iron Realm. I saw him again at the Winter Palace, when he stole the Scepter of the Seasons and killed Sage." Ash clenched his fists at that, the air around him turning cold. "Don't underestimate him. He might look like Ash, but he's an Iron knight through and through."

"Yeah, but…" Puck looked from Tertius to Ash and back again. "That doesn't tell me why he looks like ice-boy's clone."

“Because,” Rowan answered, his smooth voice carrying through the trees, “he *is* a clone of my dear little brother. The former king, Machina, created his knights to be his elite guard, so he fashioned them in the images of those at court. You should have seen my double—ugly bastard. I did him a favor and put him out of his misery. Sage’s twin, unfortunately, was gone before we could ever meet.” He stopped a few yards away and bowed, the two knights stopping just behind each shoulder. “Hello, again, princess. I’m very glad you could make it. And with your two lapdogs in tow, as well. I’m impressed. That must have taken some serious magic.” His blue eyes flickered to Ash, gleaming dangerously, and he smiled. “That’s a lovely necklace, little brother, but it won’t save you in the end. The only way to survive the Iron Realm is to become part of it. You’re only buying yourself some time with that bauble. Once it breaks, as I’m sure it will, this realm will swallow you whole.”

“It will buy me enough time to kill you,” Ash replied. “Which I’m happy to do right now, if you like.”

“Now, now.” Rowan waggled a finger at him. “None of that. We’re not here to fight. I come here to offer a proposal that could potentially end this war. Don’t you want to stop the war, Meghan Chase?”

I was instantly suspicious and crossed my arms. “That’s why you brought me here? So you can bargain for the false king?”

“Of course,” Rowan soothed. “But first, I’ll need an agreement from you, princess. One that says we agree not to kill each other while standing on neutral ground. We wouldn’t want my dear little brother to forget himself and attack, now would we?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m more worried about you double-crossing us and having an ambush waiting right outside. Why should I trust you?”

“You wound me, princess.” Rowan put a hand over his heart. “I can assure you, all we want to do is talk, but if you’re *not* interested in hearing our proposal, I guess we’ll leave with our tails between our legs and continue our march on the Nevernever.”

“Oh, fine.” I could do this dance with Rowan forever, but it would get us no closer to the proposal. Still, I’d learned my lesson with faery deals and bargains, and I chose my words carefully. “We’ll agree to a truce if your side honors it, as well. As long as we stand on neutral ground—” I gestured to the grove around us “—neither side will attack the other. Agreed?”

“Agreed. There now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Rowan smiled at me, infuriatingly smug. “And you’re going to want to hear this, princess. In fact, I think you’ll find this deal very interesting.” He leaned back and watched me, taking his time. I didn’t answer, refusing to rise to the bait. Rowan grinned. “Your side is done, princess,” he said. “We all know that you can’t win—the Iron King’s army is far greater than either Summer’s or Winter’s, and his fortress is impenetrable. In a few days, Faery will be consumed by the Iron Realm, unless Meghan Chase steps up to save it.”

“Get to the point, Rowan.”

Rowan leered at me, reminding me of a grinning skull. “The Iron King is prepared to stop his advance on the Nevernever, call back all his forces, and halt his fortress where it stands today, if you agree to his proposal.”

“Which is?”

“To marry him.” Rowan’s smile grew wider, matching my look of horror. “Join your power to his. Wed Summer to Iron, and the Iron King will cease his war on the Nevernever for as long as you remain his bride. That way, no one else gets hurt, no one else dies, and most important, the Nevernever as you know it will survive. But you must agree to become his queen, or he will hit the courts of Summer and Winter with everything at his disposal. And he will destroy them.”

My hands were shaking, and I clenched my fists to stop them. “That’s his deal? Marriage?” My stomach recoiled in disgust, and I took a breath to hide the sickness. “What *is* it with all these Iron Kings wanting to marry me?”

“Not a bad offer, if you ask me,” Rowan said, smirking. “Become a queen, save the world… Of course, you would be married in name only—the Iron King has no interest in your…erm…body, just your power. I’m sure he would even let you keep your pet lapdogs, if you want. Think of all the lives you would save, just by saying yes.”

I felt ill, but…if I could stop the war without anyone dying… Was marrying the Iron King worth saving the entire Nevernever? The lives I could save, Ash and Puck and everyone else… I glanced at Ash, and found him looking as sick and horrified as I felt. “Meghan, no,” he said, as if reading my thoughts. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Of course, she doesn’t *have* to,” Rowan called. “She can simply refuse, and the Iron King will march into the Nevernever and destroy everything. But, maybe she *doesn’t* care about saving Faery, after all.

Maybe all those lost lives have no meaning to her. If that's the case, then please, carry on and forget this conversation ever happened."

I closed my eyes, my mind spinning with choices and possibilities. *If I agree, can I get close enough to the false king to stab him? Would that break the terms of the proposal? I have to try. This might be our only chance to get close. But…* I opened my eyes and looked at Ash, at the fierce protectiveness on his face, the fear that I would say yes. *I'm so sorry, Ash. I don't want to betray you. I hope you can forgive me for this.*

Something in my expression must've tipped him off, for he went pale and took a step forward, clutching my upper arms, fingers digging into my skin. "Meghan…" His voice was hard, but I could hear the despair below the surface. "*Don't.* Please."

Rowan laughed, cruel as the edge of a blade, enjoying our torment. "Ooh, yes, beg her again, little brother," he taunted. "Beg her not to save Faery—let her see you for what you really are, a soulless creature consumed with your own selfish desires, uncaring of anything but what you consider yours. Make sure you tell her how much you love her, enough to destroy your entire court and everything in it."

"Hey, corpse-breath, why don't you do everyone a favor and sew your lips shut?" Puck drawled, his eyes narrowed in anger. "It'll match the rest of your face *and* be an improvement. Don't listen to him, princess," he continued, turning to me. "These kinds of marriage proposals *always* have some hidden agenda or loophole."

Something Puck said jogged my memory, and I gently freed myself from Ash to face Rowan. "Let's hear that proposal again," I said. "From the beginning. Just his offer, word for word."

Rowan rolled his eyes. "Do I look like a parrot?" he sneered. "Fine, princess, but I grow impatient, and so does the king. Last time, so do your best to follow, yes? The Iron King wishes you to become his queen. Wed Summer to Iron, and he will cease his war with the Nevernever for as long as you remain his bride—"

"As long as I remain his bride," I repeated. "Till death do us part, I suppose?"

"That is the traditional wedding vow, I believe."

"So, what's to stop him from killing me as soon as I say 'I do'?"

Rowan stiffened, and the two Iron knights shared a glance. "You assume the Iron King would do such a thing?"

“Of course he would!” Puck added, nodding as if it all made sense. “If Meghan ‘weds her power to his,’ he won’t need her anymore. She will have already given him what he wants. So, on their wedding night, off with her head.”

“‘He will cease his war with the Nevernever as long as she remains his bride,’” Ash continued thoughtfully, narrowing his eyes. “Which means he’ll resume his march as soon as she’s dead.”

“And he’ll be more powerful than ever,” I finished.

Rowan laughed, but it sounded rather forced. “Fascinating theory,” he taunted, though it lacked the usual bite. “But it doesn’t change the fact that the Iron King is ready to destroy the Nevernever, and this is your only chance to stop him. What’s your answer, princess?”

I looked at Ash, smiled faintly, and turned to Rowan. “The answer is no,” I said firmly. “I refuse. Tell the false king he doesn’t have to offer a marriage proposal to get me to come to him. I’ll be there soon enough, when it’s time to kill him.”

Rowan’s lips curled in a nasty smile. “How very predictable,” he mused, backing up. “I thought you might say that, princess. That’s why I’ve already sent forces to destroy your little rebel base. Better hurry back—they should almost be there by now.”

“What?” I stared at Rowan, wishing I could punch the smirk right off his face. “You bastard. They weren’t even a threat. You couldn’t have left them alone?”

“Glitch is a traitor to the Iron King, and his rebels are a blight that must be eliminated,” Rowan said smugly. “Besides, I would have destroyed them anyway, just to see the look on your face when you realized more people will die because of you. Of course, the longer you stay here talking, the more time you waste to warn your little friends. I would start running now, princess.”

I dug my nails into my palms, anger burning my chest. We couldn’t fight them; the terms of the truce prevented it, and we had to get back quickly to help Glitch. If it wasn’t already too late. Rowan smiled at me, knowing our position, and waved cheerfully.

I glared at him, backing away with Ash and Puck. “When I come for the false king,” I told Rowan, “I’ll be coming for you, too. I promise you that.”

The traitor prince ran a blackened tongue along his lips. “Oh, I’m looking forward to it, princess.” He grinned, and we sprinted out of the grove.

CHAPTER TWENTY
IRON AGAINST IRON

I heard the battle even over the howl of the wind.

Pushing my glider as fast as it could possibly go, I swooped over a rise and saw the tower ruins swarming with enemy forces. Iron knights clashed with armored dwarves, silvery praying mantises with scythelike arms swiped at frantic hacker elves, and metal clockwork hounds hurled themselves into the fray. In the distance, a huge beetle tank lumbered toward the base, crushing everything in its path as musket elves blasted their guns into the crowds.

"We should take out that bug first," Ash called, drawing alongside me. "If I take care of the gunners on top, can you bring it down?"

I nodded, ignoring the persistent fear in my gut. "I think so."

"You two go on," Puck shouted, wheeling his glider away. "I'll hold the line at the entrance, make sure nothing gets through. See ya when we win, princess!" he called as he swooped away.

I took a breath and glanced at my knight. "Ready, Ash?"

He nodded. "Let's go."

I pushed the glider's legs and sent it into a steep dive, swooping toward the huge black insect. Far below, the screech of metal rang in my ears. The boom of gunshots echoed over the field, and the screams of the wounded and dying made my skin crawl.

Something small and fast zipped by us, hitting the glider's leg in a burst of sparks and making it veer sharply to the left. Wheeling around, I looked back to see several birdlike creatures, their beaks and the edges of their wings gleaming like a sword edge, spiraling up for another dive-bomb attack.

"Split up!" I yelled to Ash, who had seen them, as well. "We're sitting ducks otherwise. I'll try to draw off their attacks." Without waiting for a reply, I yanked on the glider's leg and sent it wheeling in another direction, looking back for the bombers. Two broke from the flock and streaked toward me with high-pitched cries.

I banked left, missing them, but barely. They shot past me like falling stars, viciously fast. One of the bird's razor-edged wings hit my poor glider again, nearly making me lose control as the bird darted away. Straightening out again, I looked up to see the birds coming around once more, and clenched my jaw.

Okay, birds. You wanna play? Come on, then.

I pushed the glider into a steep dive, aiming for the battle below. The birds followed, their hunting cries echoing behind me. As we zipped by Ash, I spared him a split-second glance, just in time to see icy-blue light burst from the front of his glider and the shattered form of a bird drop away. I felt a stab of alarm as we passed; he was using glamour! But then the ground came swooping up insanely fast, filling my vision, and I had no time for other thoughts.

I pulled up, barely missing the top of a knight's head, and heard a shriek of dismay as the closest dive-bird slammed into the Iron knight with a loud crunch, sending them both tumbling over the field. Weaving and dodging, I skimmed along the ground, soldiers and rebels whipping by me like telephone poles as I headed for the tower.

"This might not have been such a great idea," I muttered, but then it was too late, and we flew straight into the ruins.

Beams and walls loomed up in front of me. I dodged and ducked frantically, yanking madly on the poor glider's legs as we avoided crashing by a hairbreadth again and again. I didn't dare look back to see how our remaining pursuer was doing, but I didn't hear any crash or screech of metal, so I assumed it was still following us.

As I ducked under a beam, the ruins fell away and the tree rose up in the center, huge and magnificent. With the bird's angry scream still on my tail, I hurled myself at the trunk.

A shudder went through the glider, and I gritted my teeth. "Come on, just give me one more trick," I muttered. The trunk loomed before us, filling my vision. At the last possible second, I yanked sharply, and the glider swooped straight up, missing the tree by inches. The bird was not so fortunate and slammed beak-first into the trunk, making several leaves tumble to the ground. I couldn't pause to celebrate, though, as we were skimming vertically along the tree, so close I could've reached out and touched it, and the branches were zooming down at us. With one last effort, we dodged and wove our way through the top of the tree until

finally bursting through the canopy in an explosion of silver leaves, into open sky.

The glider sagged, its whole body trembling, and I reached up to pat its chest. “You did good,” I panted, shaking myself. “It’s not over yet, though.”

The glider gave a tired buzz but roused itself and shot forward toward the battle again. Ash came swooping toward us, his expression and even the way he flew his glider determined and angry.

“Why do you insist on hurling yourself into battles where I can’t follow?” he snarled, wheeling his glider next to mine. “I can’t protect you if you’re constantly running away from me.”

His words stung, and my adrenaline-soaked brain responded in turn before I thought better of it. “I made the call—it was a split-second decision, and I don’t need your approval, Ash! I don’t need you to protect me from everything!”

Shock, hurt, and disbelief flickered across his features. Then, his expression closed, his eyes turning blank and stony as the mask of the Unseelie prince dropped across his face.

“As you wish, lady,” he said in a stiff, formal voice. “What would you have me do?”

I shivered, hearing him speak like that. The cold, unreachable Ice Prince… But there was no time to talk, as a scream from the fighting below and the roar of gunfire jerked me back to the situation. Talking would have to wait.

“This way,” I said, and pushed my glider into a steep dive, Ash following on my tail. The fighting was still fast and furious, but the numbers were fewer now on both sides. The monstrous iron beetle still plodded forward relentlessly, scattering waves of rebels before it, their weapons bouncing off its metal hide.

“We have to take that bug down, now!” I yelled to Ash, hoping he could hear me. “If I can get on top of it, I might be able to stop it!”

As I circled the beetle, the musket elves perched on its broad back looked up and spotted me. Swinging their guns around, there was a roar of musket fire, and I felt the wind from several iron balls go zinging past my face. The glider jerked violently, shuddering in the air, and I fought to keep it upright.

Then Ash's glider swooped by overhead, and the Unseelie knight dropped right into the cluster of elves. Sword flashing, he whirled and spun in a blue circle of death, and the elves fell away, tumbling off the beetle to the unforgiving ground.

Standing alone on the back of the huge insect, Ash gave his blade a final flourish and slammed it back in its sheath. His cold gaze met mine, defiant and unyielding, a silent challenge. Avoiding his icy glare, I swung close enough to drop onto the beetle's carapace, letting my poor, gallant glider fly off to recuperate.

Okay, I was on the bug's back. Now what? I looked around, wondering if there was a steering wheel or reins or something that controlled this giant thing.

"The antennae," Ash said flatly, breaking through my thoughts. I blinked at him.

"What?"

The Ice Prince gave me one of his hostile stares and gestured toward the front of the beetle, where a pair of stiff black antennae, each as thick as my arm, stuck over the bug's carapace. Ropes, dangling from the tips of the antennae, swept down and were tied to a platform behind the beetle's head. "There's your saddle," Ash pointed out, still in that same cold, flat voice. "Better get this thing under control before it plows straight into the tower."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and hurried to the steering platform, arms spread to balance against the swaying of the giant bug. Grabbing the reins, I peered out over the beetle's head, seeing the remaining forces of knights and rebels scurrying away before me. I saw Glitch, locked in battle with a huge clockwork golem, roll under the giant's blow and touch the golem's knee as he passed. The golem spasmed, froze in place, and toppled to the ground, threads of lightning crawling over its body. An Iron knight rushed Glitch from behind, but Puck suddenly leaped over the golem and slammed his foot into the knight's face, knocking him back. They were fighting bravely, but the false king's forces had backed the rebels against the base of the tower and were steadily closing in. They needed the cavalry, right *now.*

"Okay, bug," I muttered, gripping the reins. The beetle's antennae twitched, and it cocked a massive black eye back to stare at me. "I hope you like me better than every horse I've ever been on. Now, charge!"

The bug lurched forward, nearly throwing me from the platform, and gave a bellow that shook the earth. Iron knights and soldiers glanced back in alarm as the huge bug plowed into them, crushing them underfoot or sweeping them aside with its armored head. As we broke through the lines, tossing the enemy like leaves, the reenergized rebels gave a savage roar and charged, swarming over the soldiers with desperate abandon.

Moments later, beaten back, demoralized, half their army killed by rebels or trampled under the huge bug, the remaining enemy forces broke away and retreated, fleeing over the cracked ground to vanish over the horizon.

I pulled the rampaging beetle to a stop, tying off the reins as a cheer went up from Glitch's remaining forces. I was wondering how I would get off the giant bug, when the beetle, sensing the battle was done, folded its legs and sank down with a rumbling groan, making the ground tremble. Sliding down the smooth carapace, I landed with a grunt and straightened quickly, looking around for Glitch.

Ash dropped beside me, making no sound, his features still distant and cold like a stranger's. Guilt stabbed me like a blade when I saw him, but even now, I couldn't talk to him like I wanted. Now more than ever, I knew we couldn't sit here doing nothing. Not when the false king was almost to the front lines. We had to act now.

I fought my way through the crowd, shouldering rebels aside as they surrounded me, laughing and cheering, congratulating me on a brilliant counterstrike.

"Where's Glitch?" I called, my voice nearly lost in the cacophony. "I need to speak to him! Where is he?"

Suddenly, I saw him, standing over a body on the ground, arms crossed to his chest and face grim. A hacker elf knelt over the prone figure, prodding him with long fingers. My heart stopped when I saw who it was.

"Puck!" I shouldered my way through the crowd, rushing up to his still form. My heart pounded. Blood smeared his face, oozing out beneath his hair, and his skin was pale. One hand still gripped his curved dagger. I shoved the elf out of the way, ignoring his protests, and knelt beside Puck, taking his hand. He was deathly still, though I thought I could see the faint rise and fall of his chest, and tears rose to my eyes.

"He fought bravely," Glitch murmured. "Threw himself at a squad of Iron knights that would've killed me. I've rarely seen such courage, even

among the Iron fey."

Rage burned, hot and furious, searing away the tears. I suddenly had to fight the urge to leap up and stab Glitch with Puck's dagger. "You," I said in a low voice, anger burning my throat. "You have no clue of what courage is. You say you oppose the false king, but all you do is sit here and cower, hoping he won't notice you. You're cowards, all of you. Puck was hurt fighting *your* war, and you don't even have the guts to do the same."

Angry murmurs went through the crowd. I felt Ash step up beside me, silently challenging anyone to come close. Glitch was quiet for a moment, but the lightning in his hair snapped angrily.

"And what would you have us do, your highness?" he challenged. "Throw my people at the feet of the false king, knowing that they will die? You saw his army. You know we wouldn't stand a chance."

"You don't really have a choice," I replied, still searching Puck's face, hoping for a flicker of life, a sign that he would be all right. "You can't stay here. The false king knows where you are now. He'll come after you again, and he won't stop until he kills every last one of you."

"We can move," Glitch said. "We can evacuate to a safe place again—"

"For how long?" I stood and turned on Glitch, glaring at him furiously. "How long do you think you can hide before he finds you again?" I raised my voice, staring around me at the rest of the fey. "How long are you willing to cower like sheep while he destroys everything? Do you think you'll *ever* be safe while he's out there? If we don't stand against him now, he'll only get stronger."

"Again, what would you have us do, princess?" Glitch snapped, his spines snapping furiously. "Our forces are too small! There's nothing we can do to stop him."

"There is." I stared at him, keeping my voice level and calm. "You can join forces with Summer and Winter."

Glitch barked a laugh as the crowd exploded with noise. "Join the oldbloods?" he mocked. "You *are* delusional. They want to destroy us as much as the false king. You think Oberon and Mab will happily let us march in and shake hands and everything will be fine? They won't let us across the border without trying to kill us all."

"They will if *I* lead you there." I stared him down, refusing to give. "They will if there is no other way to beat the false king. Come on, Glitch! You all want the same thing, and this is the only way we stand a chance.

You can’t hide from him forever.” Glitch didn’t say anything, refusing to meet my gaze, and I threw my hands up in frustration. “Fine! Stay here and shake like a coward. But I’m going. You can try to keep me here by force, but I can tell you, it’s not going to be pretty. As soon as Puck is well enough, we’re leaving, with or without your consent. So either help me or get out of my way.”

“All right!” Glitch yelled, startling me. Running his hands through his hair, he sighed and gave me an irritated look. “All right, princess,” he said in a softer voice. “You win. You make a good point. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?” He sighed again, shaking his head. “We can’t stay hidden forever. It’s only a matter of time before he comes for us again. If I’m going to die, I’d rather die in battle than be hunted down like a rat. I only hope your oldblood friends don’t try to kill us as soon as the battle is done. I can see Oberon conveniently letting that little detail slip in any deal we make with them.”

“He won’t,” I promised, relief blossoming through me. “I’ll be there. I’ll make sure of it.”

“You tell ’em, princess,” Puck murmured from the ground.

I whirled, my heart leaping, as Puck opened his eyes and grinned up at me weakly. “Now that,” he said as I knelt beside him, “was a rousing speech. I think I shed a few tears.”

“You idiot!” I wanted to smack and hug him at the same time. “What happened? We thought you might be dying.”

“Me? Nah.” Puck grabbed my arm and eased himself upright, wincing as he gingerly prodded the back of his head. “Took a nasty whack to the skull that put me out for a few minutes, that’s all. Would’ve said something sooner, but you were on a roll and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

The urge to hit him increased, especially since he was shooting me that old, stupid grin, the one that reminded me of my best friend, who’d looked after me in school, who was always there no matter what happened. I pulled him to his feet, punched him in the shoulder, and threw my arms around him, hugging him tightly. “Don’t scare me like that,” I hissed. “I couldn’t bear losing you a second time.”

Releasing him, I turned to Glitch, who was watching us with a bemused, uncomfortable expression on his face. “Didn’t you say something about helping us?”

“Sure, princess. Whatever you say.” Glitch looked more resigned than convinced, but turned to his rebels and raised his voice. “Evacuate the camp!” he called, his voice carrying over the field. “Pack up and take only what is necessary! Healers, gather our wounded and take care of them as best as you can! Anyone who can still fight needs to be ready to travel by morning! The rest of you, suit up and be ready to march! Tomorrow, we go to join forces with Oberon and the oldbloods! Anyone who has a problem with that, or who is too weak or hurt to fight, should leave right now! Get going!”

The camp exploded into action. Glitch watched the rebels scurry about for a moment, then turned to me with a weary look.

“Well, it’s done. I hope you know what you’re doing, your highness. We leave before dawn.” Then, someone called to him, and he left, vanishing into the dispersing crowd and leaving me alone with Puck and Ash.

I was suddenly aware of Ash, standing a few yards away, regarding me and Puck with the expression of a granite wall. I hadn’t forgotten him, but that cold, silvery glare, blank as a mirror’s surface, brought a rush of emotions flooding back. Before I could say anything, Ash turned to me and gave a stiff, formal bow. “My lady,” he said in a calm, flat voice, meeting my gaze. “I must tend to my injuries before the night is out. Will you please excuse me?”

That same cool, formal tone. Not mocking or vicious, just overly polite, without emotion. My stomach clenched, and words froze to the back of my mouth. I wanted to talk to him, but the coldness in his eyes sliced into me, making me pause. Instead, I simply nodded, and watched my knight turn on his heel and stride toward the tower without looking back.

Puck gave a very exaggerated shiver and rubbed his arms.

“Whew, is it cold in here, or is it just me? Trouble in paradise, princess?” I felt my face heat, and Puck shook his head. “Well, don’t drag me into it. I learned long ago that you don’t get in the middle of a lover’s spat. Nothing *ever* goes as planned—people fall in love with the wrong person, someone ends up with a donkey head, and then it’s a whole big mess.” He glanced at me and sighed. “Let me guess,” he muttered, leading me back toward the tower. “You did something mildly crazy during the last battle, and ice-boy freaked out.”

I nodded, a lump rising to my throat. “He was angry that I went off without him,” I said. “But then I got mad because he didn’t trust me to handle things myself. I mean, I can’t always have him watching over my shoulder, right?” Puck raised his eyebrows, and I sighed. “Okay, it was reckless and stupid. I could’ve been killed, and a lot of people are counting on me to stop the false king. Ash knew that.”

“And…?” Puck prodded.

“And…I might have…told him that I didn’t need him anymore.”

Puck winced. “Ouch. Well, you know what they say—you always hurt the one you love. Or is that the one you hate? I can never remember.” I sniffled, and he put an arm around me as we ducked into the ruins. “Well, don’t worry about it too much, princess. Let ice-boy cool off for the night and then try to talk to him tomorrow. He won’t stay angry with you too long, I bet. Ash isn’t one to hold a grudge.”

I pulled back and frowned at him. “What are you talking about? He’s held a grudge against you for centuries!”

“Oh. Right.” Puck half grimaced as I slapped his chest. “But it’s different with you, princess. Ash is just afraid you *don’t* need him. That whole ice-prince song and dance?” He snorted. “It’s just a device he uses to protect himself, so he doesn’t get hurt when someone stabs him in the back. That happens a lot at the Winter Court, as I’m sure you know.”

I did know. I’d seen the cold, callous nature of the Unseelie Court, and the royal family was the worst, with Mab pitting her own sons against each other to earn her favor. Ash had grown up among those who knew only violence and betrayal, where emotion was considered a weakness to be exploited, and love was a virtual death sentence.

“But I know Ash,” Puck continued. “When he’s with you…” He hesitated, scratching the back of his head like he did when he was nervous. “The only time I’ve seen him like that was when he was with Ariella.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I think you’re good for him, Meghan,” he said, smiling in a small, sad way that was completely different from the Puck I knew. “I see the way he looks at you, something I haven’t seen in him since the day we lost Ariella. And…I know you love him in a way you can’t love me.” He looked away, just for a moment, and took a deep breath. “Jealousy isn’t something we deal with well,” he admitted. “But some of us have been around long enough to know when to let go, and what is most important.

The happiness of my two best friends should be more important than some ancient feud." Stepping close, he placed a palm on my cheek, brushing a strand of hair from my face. Glamour flared up around him, casting him in a halo of emerald light. In that moment, he was pure fey, unbound by shallow human fears and embarrassment, a being as natural and ancient as the forest. "I have always loved you, princess," Robin Goodfellow promised, his green eyes shining in the darkness. "I always will. And I'll take whatever you can give me."

I looked down, unable to meet his open stare, human fears and self-consciousness coming to the surface. "Even if all I can offer is friendship? Will that still be enough?"

"Well, not really." Puck dropped his hand, his voice turning light and carefree again, more like the Puck I knew. "Damn not being able to lie. Princess, if you suddenly decide ice-boy is a first-class jerk and that you can't stand him, I'll always be here. But, for now, I'll settle for being the best friend. And as the best friend, it's my duty to inform you not to lose sleep over Ash tonight." We came to my room, and Puck paused, turning to me with his hand on the doorknob. "Also, don't bother trying to find him. If Ash says he wants to be left alone, he wants to be left alone. Intruders might get an icicle at the head for bothering him." He winced and pushed the door open. "Trust me on that."

A pair of sleepy golden eyes turned to us as we entered the room, and Grimalkin sat up on the cot. "There you are." He sighed, yawning to show off his bright pink tongue. "I was afraid you would never get here."

"Where have you been, Grimalkin?" I burst out, crossing the room to glare down at him. He blinked at me calmly. "Everyone is about to leave, and we couldn't find a trace of you."

"Mmm. You must not have looked very hard." The cat blinked at me calmly. "So, you actually convinced Glitch to join with the courts, did you? That will be interesting. You *do* know that even with the combined forces of the rebels, our side is still comparatively smaller in number to the false king's army? I believe that is why Mab and Oberon sent you specifically after the false king—if the head is cut off, the body will follow."

"I know." I faced the cat, feeling self-conscious under that disapproving gaze. "But I have to go through the army to get to the head.

At least this way I'll have a chance of getting into that fortress. Right now I can't even get close."

"And letting the false king march his army into the Nevernever is a better choice."

"What am I supposed to do, Grimalkin? This is our only chance. I don't have another option."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you all go to your deaths. I am continuously amazed with the lack of preparation around here." Grimalkin scratched his ear and stood, waving his tail. "By the way, I believe someone was looking for this earlier."

He moved aside, revealing the limp, crumpled form of a gremlin lying on the cot. I gasped and looked at Grim, who seemed ridiculously pleased with himself.

"Grimalkin! You didn't…is he…?"

"Dead? Of course not, human." The cat's whiskers twitched, offended. "Although, it could be slightly dizzy when it wakes up. I do advise you to keep it more under control, however, as it seems inordinately drawn to mischief. Perhaps you could put it on a leash."

"Looks like it's coming to," Puck noted.

I knelt beside the cot as Razor's ears twitched and the spindly body stirred, raising his head. For a moment, he stared at me, blinking in confusion. Then his gaze slid to Grimalkin and he shot up with a hiss, leaping for the wall.

He missed, tumbling back onto the cot in a tangle of ears and limbs. Spitting in confusion and fury, he staggered to his feet, wobbling and flailing at the air. I grabbed for him, but he darted away, lightning quick, and leaped off the cot.

Puck's hand shot out, grabbing him by his enormous ears, holding him at arm's length as he squirmed and struggled. Razor hissed and cursed and spat, sparks flying from his mouth, his gaze not on Puck but on the cait sith beside me.

"Bad kitty!" he screeched, snarling and baring his fangs at Grimalkin, who yawned and turned away to groom his tail. "Evil, evil, sneaky kitty! Bite your head off in your sleep, I will! Hang you by your toes and set you on fire! Burn, burn!"

"Uh, princess," Puck said, wincing as the gremlin clawed and flailed, sparks flying everywhere, "this isn't exactly fun for me. Should I drop this

thing or have Grim knock it out again?”

“Razor!” I snapped, clapping my hands in front of his face. “Stop it, right now!”

The gremlin stopped, blinking up at me with an almost hurt expression. “Master punish bad kitty?” he said in a pitiful voice.

“No, I’m not going to punish the bad kitty,” I said, and Grimalkin snorted. “And you aren’t, either. I want to talk to you. Will you stay and not run off if we let you go?”

He bobbed his head, as best he could while his ears were gripped tightly by Puck. “Master wants Razor to stay, Razor stay. Not move until told. Promise.”

“All right.” I glanced at Puck and nodded. “Let him go.”

Puck raised an eyebrow. “You sure, princess? All I heard was static buzz and chipmunk chatter.”

“I can understand him,” I said, earning a dubious look from Puck and a gleam of keen interest from Grimalkin. “He promised not to move. Let him go.”

He shrugged and opened his fist, dropping the gremlin to the cot again. Razor hit the mattress and instantly froze; not even his ears vibrated as he gazed up at me with expectant green eyes.

I blinked. “Uh, at ease,” I muttered, and the gremlin plopped into a sit, still watching me intently. “Look, Razor, I think it’s best if you leave. The camp is being evacuated right now. You can’t stay here by yourself, and I don’t think you’ll be welcome where we’re going.”

“No leave!” Razor leaped up, his face eager. “Stay with Master. Go where Master goes. Razor can help!”

“You can’t,” I said, hating the way his ears drooped like a scolded puppy. “We’re marching to war, and it’ll be dangerous. You can’t help us against the false king’s army.” He buzzed sadly, but I kept my voice firm. “Go home, Razor. Go back to Mag Tuiredh. Isn’t that where you really want to be? With all the other gremlins?”

Grimalkin sighed loudly, causing me to look back and Razor to hiss at him. “Am I the only one here who has any insight at all?” he said, looking to each of our faces. We stared at him, and he shook his head. “Drawing a blank, are you? Think about what you just said, human. Repeat that last phrase, if you would.”

I frowned. *“Isn’t that where you want to be?”*

He closed his eyes. “The next phrase, human.”

“With all the other gremlins.” He stared at me expectantly, and I raised my hands. “*What?* What are you getting at, Grim?”

Grimalkin thumped his tail. “It is times like these I am ever more grateful that I am a cat,” he sighed. “Why do you think I brought you that creature, human? To keep up my stalking skills? I assure you, they are quite adequate already. Please attempt to use the brain I know is hidden somewhere in that head. There are thousands of gremlins in Mag Tuiredh, perhaps hundreds of thousands. And who is the only person in the entire realm who can communicate with them?”

“Me.” Suddenly what he was implying hit me full force. “The gremlins. There are thousands of them out there. And…and they listen to me.”

“Bravo,” Grimalkin deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “The lightbulb finally comes on.”

“I can ask the gremlins to help us,” I said, ignoring Grimalkin, who lay down and curled his tail around himself, his work apparently done. “I can go to Mag Tuiredh and…” I stopped, shaking my head. “No. No, I can’t. I have to be there when we reach the Nevernever, or Oberon and Mab will try to kill Glitch and his army. They would think it’s just another attack by the false king.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Puck mused, crossing his arms. “Mab wouldn’t hesitate, and even Oberon would chop first and ask questions later when it comes to the Iron fey.” He glanced down at Razor, who was still watching me intently and cocking his head like a dog trying to understand. “What about Buzzsaw there? Could you send it back with a message to its friends, telling them what you want?”

“I guess I could try. What do we have to lose?” I turned to the gremlin, who sat up and flared his ears, ready and eager. “Razor, if I asked the other gremlins to help me, do you think they would come?”

“We help!” Razor bounced in place, grinning. “Razor help! Help Master, yes!”

I didn’t know if that meant all the gremlins would help or just him, but I went on anyway. “I want you to take a message back to Mag Tuiredh. This is for all gremlins. Gather everyone who is willing to fight and meet us at the edge of the Iron Realm, where it meets the wyldwood. We have to

stop the false king's moving tower before it hits the battlefront. Can you do that, Razor? Do you understand what I'm asking?"

"Razor understands!" the gremlin crowed, and leaped to the wall, flashing his neon grin. "I help! Meet Master in funny elf lands! I go!" And before I could call him back, he scurried up the corner, slid through the slats in the vent, and disappeared.

Puck raised an eyebrow and glanced at me. "Do you think he really understood what you wanted?"

Grimalkin raised his head and gave me an annoyed look, as if I had just blown something he'd spent hours setting up. "I don't know," I murmured, watching the vent. "I guess we can only hope."

* * *

I DIDN'T SEE ASH all that evening, though I ignored Puck's advice and looked for him. The ruins, bustling with activity at first, eventually died down into a somber quiet as scores of faery rebels prepared to march to battle. Armor was cleaned, blades were sharpened, and Glitch vanished behind closed doors with several of his advisers and hacker elves, probably to discuss strategy. Puck, forever curious and viewing all private meetings as a personal challenge, told me he would find out what was going on and disappeared. Restless, nervous, and annoyed that I couldn't find Ash, I retreated to my room, where Grimalkin was curled in the middle of my bed and refused to scoot over so I could lie down.

"Grimalkin, move!" I snapped after trying and failing to ease him over. He rumbled a growl as I pushed at him, flexing his very sharp claws, and I quickly pulled my hand back. Golden eyes slitted open and glared at me.

"I am rather weary, human," Grimalkin warned, flattening his ears in a rare but dangerous show of temper. "Considering I spent all night tracking down that gremlin, I would politely ask that you let me sleep before we go trekking down the same path we just came from. If you are looking for the Winter prince, he is up on the balcony with the insect things." Grimalkin sniffed and closed his eyes. "Why not go pester him for a while?"

My heart leaped. "Ash? Ash is on the balcony?"

Grimalkin sighed. "Why do humans deem it necessary to repeat everything that is told them?" he mused, but I was already out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
FERRUM'S PAST

The rebels shot me curious, annoyed looks as I jogged through the base, dodging hacker elves gathering up their computers, stammering apologies as I wove my way through the crowds. Reaching the stairs to the balcony, I took them two at a time but slowed when I came to the landing. Remembering what Puck said about intruders and hurled icicles, I peeked cautiously around the corner.

Ash stood on the edge of the landing, his back to me, the wind tugging at his hair and cloak. Overhead, dark red clouds blotted out the moon, and tiny flakes of gray danced on the breeze, dissolving to powder when they touched my skin. A fine coating of dust covered the balcony, muffling my footsteps as I eased through the arch. I knew Ash heard me from the tilt of his head, but he didn't turn around.

"It's unbelievable," he whispered, his eyes gazing out over the landscape. In the distance, a thread of poisonous green lightning crawled under the belly of the clouds, and the air turned sharp and chemical. "To think this was once the Nevernever. To know that it could all turn into this…" He slowly shook his head. "It would be the end of us. Faery would be extinct forever. Everything I knew, places that have stood since the beginning of time, gone."

"We won't let that happen," I said firmly, joining him at the edge. "The false king will be stopped, and this will go back to normal. I'm not going to let everything disappear."

He didn't say anything to that, continuing to gaze over the landscape. Silence fell, thick and uncomfortable. The wind whipped at my hair, howling across the distance between us. I could sense both of us wanting to speak, to break the awkwardness of unspoken apologies, until the quiet grew more than I could bear. "I'm sorry, Ash," I murmured at last. "For what I said earlier. I didn't mean it."

He gave his head a small shake. "No. You shouldn't apologize." With a sigh, he raked a hand through his hair, still not looking at me. "I'm the one

who taught you to fight, to take care of yourself. I have no right to be angry when you prove yourself capable of every lesson I gave you."

"I had a pretty good teacher."

He smiled, very faintly, though his eyes remained dark, his gaze on the clouds sweeping the horizon. "You're not the same girl I met when you first came to the Nevernever, searching for your brother," he said softly. "You've grown…changed. You're stronger now, like she was." He didn't say her name, but I knew whom he meant. Ariella, the love he lost to a wyvern attack long before we ever met. "She was always the strong one," Ash continued, his voice barely above a murmur. "Even the Winter Court couldn't crush her spirit, turn her spiteful and cruel. She was better than all of us. But I couldn't save her." He closed his eyes, clenching his fists with the memory. "She died because I failed to protect her. I can't…" His voice trembled, just a little, and he took a quiet breath. "I can't watch that happen to you."

"I'm not her," I said, slipping my arm through his. "You're not going to lose me, I promise."

He shivered, glancing at me from the corner of his eyes. "Meghan," he began, and I could sense his unease. "There's something…I haven't told you. I should have explained before but…I was afraid it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy if you knew." He paused a moment, as if waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he took a deep breath. "Long ago," he began, "someone told me that I would be cursed in love, that those I came to cherish would be torn from me, that as long as I remained soulless, I would lose everyone I truly cared for."

My heart stopped for a moment, then picked up again, faster than before. "Who told you that?"

"A very old druid priestess." He seemed hesitant now, and I caught a flicker of dark blue regret from the corner of my eye. "This was before Ariella, back in the ancient times, when humans still feared and worshipped the old gods and had all sorts of rituals for keeping us out, which of course only challenged us to find ways around them. I was much younger then, and my brothers and I would play our cruel games with the mortals, particularly with the young, silly females we came across." He paused, tilting his head back slightly, gauging my reaction.

"Go on," I murmured.

He sighed, and very gently freed himself from my hand, turning to face me. “There was a girl,” he said, choosing his words very carefully, “barely sixteen in mortal years, and as innocent as they came. Her favorite pastime was picking flowers and playing in the creek at the edge of the forest. I knew, because I watched her from the trees. She was always alone, carefree, so naive to the dangers in the woods.” A hint of bitterness crept into his voice, a dark loathing for the faery in the story. I felt cold as he continued in a soft, flat voice. “I lured her into the forest with pretty words and gifts and promises of affection. I made sure she fell in love with me, that no other human male would ever make her feel what I could, and then I took it all away. I told her that mortals were nothing to the fey, that she was nothing. I told her that it was a game, nothing more, and that the game was now over. I broke more than her heart; I broke her spirit, broke her. And I reveled in it.”

I had been waiting for it, but it still made me sick, the knowledge that Ash could be that heartless, just another capricious fey toying with human emotion. This girl, sixteen, lonely, eager for love, had been like me once. If I had been at the edge of the woods that day, instead of her, Ash would’ve done the same to me.

“What happened to her?” I asked when he fell silent again. Ash closed his eyes.

“She died,” he said simply. “She couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t do anything but pine away, until her body grew so weak it simply gave out.”

“And you felt horribly guilty about it?” I guessed, trying to glean some sort of moral from this tale, a lesson learned or something like that. But Ash shook his head with a bitter smile.

“I didn’t think twice about her,” he said, dashing my hopes and making my gut twist. “Not having a soul frees us from any sort of conscience. She was only a human, and a foolish one at that, to fall in love with a faery. She wasn’t the first, nor would she be the last. But her grandmother, the high priestess of the girl’s clan, was not so foolish. She sought me out, and told me what I just told you—she cursed me, promised that I would be destined to lose everyone I truly cared for, that it was the price for being soulless. Of course, I just laughed it off as the superstitions of a weakling mortal…until I fell in love with Ariella.” His voice grew even softer. “And now, with you.”

He turned away and gazed out over the edge again. “When Ariella was taken from me, I suddenly understood. We don’t have a conscience, but falling in love changes things. I understood what I had put that girl through, the pain she suffered because of me. I told myself I wouldn’t make the mistake of caring for someone again.” He gave a bitter chuckle and shook his head. “And then you came along and ruined all that.”

I couldn’t answer. I kept seeing that girl, and the dark, handsome stranger she fell for, died for. “Why are you telling me this?” I whispered.

“Because, I want you to understand what I am.” Ash looked down at me, solemn and grim. “I’m not a human with pointed ears, Meghan. I am and will always be Fey. Soulless. Immortal. Because of my actions that day, someone I loved died. And now, here we are, on the brink of war and —” He stopped and looked down, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “And I’m afraid. I’m afraid I’ll fail you like I did Ariella, that the crimes of my past will ruin any chance we have at a future. That you’ll realize who I really am, what I really am, and when I turn around you’ll be gone.”

He stopped, the wind whipping at his hair and clothes, swirling ashes into the silence. A glider on the wall turned its head and buzzed sleepily. Ash’s posture was stiff, his back and shoulders rigid, steeled for my reaction. Bracing himself to hear footsteps walking back down the stairs. I saw his shoulders tremble and caught the faint aura of fear before he could hide it.

I stepped close and slipped my arms around his waist, hearing his quiet intake of breath as I pulled him against me. “That was a long time ago,” I murmured, pressing my cheek to his back, listening to his thudding heart. “You’ve changed since then. That Ash wouldn’t protect a silly human girl with his life, or become her knight, or walk into exile with her. Every step of the way, you’ve always been there, right beside me. I’m not letting you go now.”

“I’m a coward.” Ash’s voice was subdued. “If I cared for you as much as I should, I would end my life and the curse along with it. My existence puts you in danger. If I were no longer here—”

“Don’t you dare, Ashallyn’darkmyr Tallyn.” I held him tighter, even as he flinched at the sound of his True Name. “Don’t you dare throw your life away for an unknown superstition. If you die—” My voice broke, and I swallowed thickly. “I love you,” I whispered, fisting my hands against his stomach. “You can’t leave. You swore you wouldn’t.”

Ash's hands came to rest over mine, twining our fingers together. "Even if the world stands against you," he murmured, bowing his head. "I promise."

* * *

WE STAYED ON THE BALCONY that night, sitting against the wall, watching the storm sweep over the outlying hills. We didn't say much, content just to be near each other, lost in our own thoughts. When we did speak, it was of the war and the rebels and other, present-day things, staying far from the past…or the future. I dozed several times, waking with his arms around me and my head against his shoulder.

The next thing I knew, he was shaking me awake. The night had moved on, and a pinkish light glowed against the distant horizon.

"Meghan, wake up."

"Hmm?" I yawned, rubbing my eyes. Sleeping in armor while leaning against a wall, I realized, was proving to be a bad idea, as my backside throbbed with pain. "Time to go already?"

"No." Ash stepped to the edge of the balcony. "Come look at this. Hurry."

I peered out over the edge. At first, I couldn't see anything, but then the light gleamed off something shiny and metallic on the horizon. I squinted, shielding my eyes with my hand. Could that be the glint of metal armor? Or the shiny top of an iron beetle? My blood ran cold.

"They're coming," Ash muttered, and I stumbled back from the edge.

"We have to tell Glitch!"

I scrambled back from the landing, Ash close behind me. As we flew down the stairs, it quickly became clear that Glitch already knew. The camp was in chaos, rebels rushing back and forth, grabbing weapons and throwing on armor. Those who had been wounded the day before hurried out with freshly bandaged wounds, limping or carrying those who couldn't walk.

"There you are!" Puck met us at the foot of the stairs, rolling his eyes as we came charging down. "Another army on the way and you two are playing kissy-face on the balcony. Suit up. Looks like there's going to be another fight."

“Where’s Glitch?” I said as we hurried through the ruins, dodging rebels. “What is he thinking? We can’t fight another army now! Too many are hurt, and another fight could crush them.”

“Doesn’t seem like we have much choice, princess,” Puck said as I spotted the rebel leader arguing with Diode under the limbs of the giant tree. Glitch’s face was strained, and the hacker elf’s eyes whirled and spun as he gestured frantically.

“Glitch!” I sprinted up to him, dodging a hound, which snarled as I barely avoided a collision. “Hey, I need to talk to you!” Glitch looked up and winced when he saw who it was.

“What do you want, your highness? I’m a little busy at the moment.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as I caught up, Diode scrambling aside. “You can’t make your people fight now! We’re about to join Summer and Winter and we need everyone we can get. If you fight now, so soon after the last battle, you could lose everyone!”

“I’m aware of that, your highness!” Glitch snapped in return, his spikes flaring angrily. “But we don’t have much of a choice, do we? We can’t run—they’ll just hunt us down out there. We can’t hide—there’s really nowhere to go. All we can do is make our stand here. Thankfully, that’s not the false king’s full army, just a few attack squads. The real army is still on its way to the wyldwood, with the moving fortress I might add, and if we don’t take care of this little problem now, we won’t have a chance of joining Summer and Winter. Now, get out of my way. I should be at the front when the fighting starts.”

“Wait!” I grabbed his sleeve as he brushed past, and he whirled angrily. “There is one more option. We came up through the packrat tunnels beneath the tower. We could escape that way.”

“The tunnels?” Glitch shook off my hand. “Those tunnels run for miles. It’s a gigantic maze down there. We could wander for days.”

“Not me.” I still didn’t know how I was so familiar with the tunnels, but once I said the words, I knew they were true. “I know the way. I can get everyone through safely.”

He looked disbelieving, and my temper flared. “It’s either that or lose everyone before the war even starts! Dammit, Glitch, you have to start trusting me!”

“Do it,” Ash said softly, locking gazes with the Iron faery. “You know she’s right.”

Glitch sighed noisily, stabbing his hands through his hair. “You sure you know the way?” he asked me.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“All right,” he said slowly. “Fine. We’ll put our lives in your hands once more, your highness. Diode, spread the word. Tell everyone to meet at the central chamber and be ready to march.”

“Yes, sir.” Diode shot me a relieved look and scampered off. Glitch watched him go, then turned to glare at me with narrowed violet eyes. “This better work. You’re a gigantic pain in the ass, you know that, your highness?”

“One who’s about to save yours,” I returned, earning an appreciative snort from Puck. Glitch rolled his eyes and stalked off, and we made our way to the center of the ruins.

* * *

NOT FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, the entire rebel army was gathered beneath the branches of the great oak, armed and armored, ready to march. I was wondering how quickly we could get all the rebels down into the tunnels when Diode approached and informed us the trapdoor we came through wasn’t the only one, that there were several scattered throughout the tower, and one of them was in the center chamber, right below the tree. He was pointing out that it was buried and nearly hidden in the roots of the oak, when Glitch came in, his hair snapping wildly as he leaped onto the trunk.

“They’re almost to the tower. We need to go, now!”

Working together, Ash, Puck, and Glitch hauled up the trapdoor, letting it drop open with a ringing clang that echoed throughout the room. Straightening, Glitch looked to me and gestured to the gaping hole, leading down into darkness. “After you, your highness. Diode, go with the princess to make sure everyone knows to follow her.”

“What about you?”

“I’m staying topside to make sure everyone is through.” Glitch nodded to the stocky dwarf with the mechanical arm, waiting stoically behind us. “When everyone is down, Torque and I will follow and seal the tunnel behind us. We’re likely not coming back here again.”

“But—”

“I’ll worry about blocking our escape, you worry about not getting us lost down there.” Glitch handed me a flashlight and pointed to the hole. “Now move, before they’re at our door!”

Switching on the flashlight, I descended into the tunnels.

The musty darkness closed around me, smelling of dust, mold, and wet rock, strange and familiar at the same time. Ash dropped next to me, then Puck, and then Diode, his glowing numbered eyes seeming to float in the darkness. I wondered where Grimalkin was, and hoped he got out safely.

The hacker elf swept a nervous gaze around the tunnels, eyes spinning anxiously. “Are you sure you know the way?” he muttered, trying to sound confident, but it came out as more of a squeak. I swept my flashlight around the underground passageway and smiled in relief. Everything was familiar. I knew exactly where to go.

“Diode, start sending them down. Tell everyone to follow me.”

I stepped forward, and the rebels began dropping through the trapdoor, lanterns and flashlights swaying in the darkness. At first, it felt strange, being at the head of a huge army, feeling their eyes on my back as I led them through the tunnels. But soon, the crunch of feet and the wavering lights behind me faded into background noise, until I almost didn’t notice them.

Several minutes later, a boom rocked the passages behind us, shaking the floor and raining dust on everyone. Diode squawked in fear, Puck braced himself against a wall, and Ash grabbed my arm, holding me steady as I staggered.

“What was that?” the hacker elf cried as the dust finally cleared. Coughing, I waved my hand in front of my face and looked back at the rebels, getting to their feet and looking around nervously.

I shared a glance with Ash and Puck. “Glitch must’ve collapsed the tunnels,” I said, picking up the flashlight I’d dropped. “It was the only way to keep the false king’s forces from following us.”

“What?” Diode looked back fearfully, eyes whirling. “I thought he was just going to seal the doors. So, we can’t return to base?”

“He never meant to come back here,” I murmured, shining the light beam into the maze before us. “There’s no turning back now. The only choice is to move on.”

* * *

TIME HAD NO MEANING in the sunless corridors of the packrat tunnels. We might've been traveling for hours, or days. The tunnels all looked the same: dark, eerie, filled with strange odds and ends, like an abandoned computer monitor, or the severed head of a doll. After the explosion, Glitch would join me at the head of the march every so often, if only to make sure I still knew where I was going. After about the sixth time, he began to get on my nerves.

"Yes, I still know where I'm going!" I snapped as he emerged beside me yet again, cutting him off before he could say anything. Ash walked on my other side, silent and protective, but I caught him rolling his eyes as Glitch came up.

The rebel leader scowled. "Relax, your highness. I wasn't going to ask this time."

"Aw, that's a shame," Puck said, falling into step beside him. "You're gonna make me lose my bet with ice-boy. Come on, be a sport. Say it one more time, for me?"

"What I was going to ask," Glitch continued, ignoring Puck, "is how much longer till we're out? My troops are getting tired—we can't keep this up much longer without a break."

I frowned and looked at Ash. "How long have we been walking?"

He shrugged. "Hard to tell. A day, perhaps. Maybe longer."

"Really?" It didn't seem that long to me. I didn't feel tired. In fact, the longer we traveled, the more energy I had—the same kind of energy that had drawn me to Machina's tree. But this was a darker power, bitter and ancient, and I suddenly knew where it was coming from.

"We must be getting close to Ferrum's chamber," I muttered, and Glitch's eyebrows rose.

"Ferrum? The old king Ferrum?"

"You know about him?"

"I helped Machina overthrow him." Glitch was staring at me in disbelief. "I led the charge to the throne room with Virus and Ironhorse. You mean to tell me that he's still alive?"

"No." I shook my head. "Not anymore. He was here when I first came to the Iron Realm, on the way to get my brother back. The packrats still worshipped him, but he was terrified Machina would find him again. I think he finally faded away, and the packrats moved on when he died."

“Huh.” Glitch shook his head in wonder. “I can’t believe the old coot stayed alive for so long. If I had known about him, you can bet I would’ve searched every tunnel in the Iron Realm until I found him and put him out of his misery.”

I looked at him in horror. “Why? He seemed harmless to me. Just a sad, angry old man.”

“You don’t know what he was like before.” Glitch’s eyes narrowed. “You weren’t there when he was king. Ferrum was paranoid, terrified that someone would try to take his crown away. I was one of the newest lieutenants, but Ironhorse told me that with every new Iron fey that appeared, Ferrum grew more afraid and angry. It would’ve been best if he had stepped down, handed the throne to a successor. He was old and obsolete, and we all knew it. In this realm, the old move out to make room for the new. But Ferrum refused to give up his power, even though his bitterness was corrupting the land around him. Machina pleaded with him to reconsider his right to rule, to step down gracefully and hand the responsibility to someone else.”

“Ferrum told me Machina took his throne out of a lust for power, because he wanted it for himself.”

Glitch snorted. “Machina was one of Ferrum’s strongest supporters. The rest of us—me, Virus, and Ironhorse—were getting tired of Ferrum’s threats, of the constant fear that one of us could be next. But Machina told us to be patient, and we were more loyal to him than our crazy king. Then the day came when Ferrum’s jealous paranoia finally got the better of him, and he tried to kill Machina, stabbing at him when his back was turned. His last mistake, I’m afraid. Machina realized Ferrum was no longer fit to rule and gathered his own supporters to take the king off the throne. We were only too happy to comply.”

I felt dazed. Everything I thought I knew about Machina was wrong. “But…Machina still wanted to take over the Nevernever,” I protested. “He wanted to eradicate the old faeries and make a kingdom of Iron fey.”

“Machina was ever the strategist.” Glitch shrugged, unconcerned. “He knew Ferrum’s way—hiding in fear from the courts and hoping they wouldn’t see us—wasn’t going to work much longer. The Iron Kingdom was growing faster than ever. We couldn’t hide anymore. Sooner or later, the courts would find out, and then what? What do you think would happen when they discovered a whole kingdom of faeries born from the very thing

that could kill them? Machina knew there would be a war. He figured it would be best if we struck first."

"Too bad Meghan had to ruin it for you," Puck added, smirking at the back of Glitch's head. Glitch turned to him and matched his sneer.

"It won't matter if the false king conquers the Nevernever now, will it?" he countered. "I'll still be here, and so will all the Iron fey, but you oldbloods will become a thing of the past. And not even her highness will be able to stop it."

"That's not going to happen," I snapped, turning on him. "I'll stop the false king, just like I did Machina."

"Glad to hear it." Glitch leveled a stare at me. "But did you ever think about how you're going to stop the spread of the Iron Realm? Just because the false king is gone doesn't mean we're going away as well, princess. The Iron Kingdom will continue to grow and change the Nevernever, and in the end the courts will come after us anyway. I agree that, right now, we have to stop the false king, but you're only delaying the inevitable."

"There has to be a way," I muttered. "You're all faeries, you use glamour the same way. You're just a little different, that's all."

"We're not," Glitch said firmly, "a *little* different. Our glamour kills oldbloods. Summer magic is deadly to us, as well. If you think we can hold hands and be friends, princess, you're only fooling yourself. But we need to stop soon, or this army will be too exhausted to fight anything."

I shook my head. "No, we have to keep moving. At least until we're out of the tunnels."

"Why?"

"Because…" I closed my eyes. "He's almost there."

All three faeries stared at me. "How do you know?" Ash asked softly.

"I can feel him." Goose bumps rose along my arms, and I hugged myself, shivering. "I can feel the land…crying out where he passes. It feels…" I paused, searching for words. "It feels like someone is dragging a blade across the surface, leaving a scar behind. I've been able to sense him ever since we passed Ferrum's old chamber. The false king…he's getting close to the wyldwood now, and he's waiting for me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
THE LAST NIGHT

Eventually, we came out of the tunnels.

The night was remarkably clear as we set up camp, a tattered, ragtag army pitching tents on the edge of a bubbling magma lake, the air smelling of sulphur and brimstone. I didn't want to camp so close to the lake but Glitch overrode me, saying the smell would mask our presence, and besides his army was exhausted thanks to my forced march through the packrat tunnels. Even Ash and Puck were tired; they wouldn't say anything, but the gaunt looks and pale faces told me they weren't feeling the best. Their amulets were almost used up. The Iron Realm was finally taking its toll.

"Go lie down," I told them both, once Glitch had left to help the army pitch camp. "You're both exhausted, and we're not doing anything else tonight. Get some rest."

Puck snorted. "My, aren't we bossy today," he said, though it lacked his usual energy. "Give a girl an army and it goes straight to her head." He yawned then, scrubbing his scalp. "Right, then. If anyone needs me, I'll be passed out in my tent, trying to forget where I am. Oh, look, demon fey, lake of liquid hot magma—does this remind you of anything?" He grimaced, giving me a weak grin. "When I said I'd follow you to hell and back, I wasn't trying to be literal, princess. Ah, well." He lifted one hand in a cheerful wave. "See you tomorrow, lovebirds."

"What about you?" Ash asked as Puck sauntered off, whistling loudly. "You've been walking just as long as the rest of us. We won't have another chance to rest before we reach the battleground."

A flash of movement caught my attention. For a moment, I thought I saw a furry gray cat leap onto a boulder near the edge of the lake. But the air around him shimmered with heat, and he was gone. "I know," I said, squinting in the hot, dry air. "And it might sound strange, but I feel fine. You go on," I continued, gazing up at him. "I know you're tired. Get some rest before the battle. I'll be around."

He didn’t argue, which showed me just how exhausted he was. Stepping close, he placed a soft kiss on my forehead and walked off toward the ring of tents farthest from the lake. I watched him until he vanished behind an old, twisted monolith, then I wandered down to the lake edge.

This close to the lava, my skin felt like it would peel off my bones if I scratched at it, and I didn’t dare venture too close to the edge. One slip or stumble, and it would end very badly. Magma bubbled sluggishly, curling in slow, hypnotic patterns of orange and gold, strangely beautiful in the hellish glow. For a moment, I had the brief, crazy urge to skip a pebble across the glowing surface, then decided that would probably be a bad idea.

“The Molten Pool,” said a voice beside me, and Grimalkin appeared atop a boulder, his whiskers glowing red in the light. I was relieved to see him, though I knew he could take care of himself. “In the center of the Obsidian Plains. Ironhorse told me about this. These were his lands, back in the days of King Machina.”

“Ironhorse.” I leaned back against the rock and gazed out over the pool. The boulder was warm to the touch, even through my armor. “I wish he could’ve been here to see this,” I muttered, imagining the huge, black-iron horse standing proudly at the other side of the lake. “I wish we could’ve brought him home.”

“There is no use in wishing for the impossible, human.” Grimalkin sat down, curling his tail around himself, as we both stared out over the lake. “Ironhorse knew what he had to do. Do not let human guilt distract you from your duty, for Ironhorse did not.”

I sighed. “Is that what you had to say to me, Grim? Don’t feel guilty for a friend’s death?”

“No.” The cat twitched an ear and stood, facing me directly. “I have come to tell you that I am leaving, and I did not want you worrying about my whereabouts on the eve of battle. There are more important things to focus on. So…I am leaving.”

I pushed myself off the rock and turned to face him. “Why?”

“Human, my part here is done.” Grimalkin regarded me with what could almost be affection. “Tomorrow, you march into battle with an army of Iron fey at your back. There is no place for me in this fight—I am under no illusion that I am a warrior.” He stepped forward, ancient golden eyes

staring into mine, reflecting the light of the pool. “I have brought you as far as I can. It is time for you to step forward on your own and claim your destiny. Besides…” Grimalkin sat back, gazing out across the lake, the hot breeze ruffling his whiskers. “I have my own contract to fulfill, before this is all over.”

“*You* made a contract?”

He gave me his disdainful look, twitching his tail. “You don’t believe Ironhorse asked for nothing in return, do you? Really, human, sometimes I despair. But the night is waning, and I must go.” Leaping gracefully off the rock, he began trotting away, bottlebrush tail held straight up and proud.

I swallowed hard. “Grim? Will I see you again?”

The cait sith turned back, cocking his head. “Now, that is a strange question,” he mused. “Will you see me again, though I myself am no oracle and know nothing of the future? This I cannot tell you. I will never understand humans, but I suppose it is part of your charm.” He sniffed again, waving his plumed tail lazily. “Do try to stay out of trouble, human. I will be terribly annoyed if you manage to get yourself killed.”

“Grim, wait. Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

Grimalkin smiled. “I am a cat.”

And, just like that, he was gone.

I smiled faintly and wiped a stray tear from my face. Grim had always vanished and reappeared at will, but this time it was different. I suddenly knew I wouldn’t see him again, not for a long time anyway.

“Goodbye, Grimalkin,” I whispered, and in an even softer voice, lest the cunning feline be nearby listening, added, “thank you.”

I shivered in the hot wind, already feeling his loss. How many more would I lose before this was over? Somewhere out there, closer than ever, the false king was closing on the armies of Summer and Winter. Tomorrow was the moment of truth. Tomorrow was Judgment Day, where we would either be victorious, or die.

I suddenly wished I could talk to my family. I wanted to see Mom’s face again, hold Ethan and ruffle his hair one last time. I even wanted to see Luke, to tell him I forgave him for never noticing me, never seeing me. Mom was happy with him, and if she hadn’t met him, I wouldn’t have Ethan as a brother. I wouldn’t have a family. My throat closed up, and longing twisted my stomach into a painful knot. Would they miss me, if I

never came home? Would they stop looking for me eventually, the daughter who vanished one night and never returned?

The wind howled across the plain, lonely and desolate, as the full realization hit me and clutched my heart with icy fingers. I could die tomorrow. This was a war, and there would be numerous casualties on both sides. The false king himself could be too much, if I even figured out a way to get into his fortress. We could very well lose. I could be struck down, and my family would never know what happened, what I was fighting for. If I died, who would tell them? Oberon? No, if I lost, he would fade away, as well. If I lost, it would be over. The end of Faery. Forever.

Oh, God.

I was shaking now, unable to stop myself. This was really it. The last battle, and it all rested on me. What if I failed? If I couldn't beat the false king, they would all die—Oberon, Grim, Puck, Ash…

Ash.

Shivering, I hurried back to the camp, past the cluster of tents set up around the lake. The camp was quiet and still, unlike the wild, prebattle revel of the Summer and Winter camps. I suddenly understood the significance and would have welcomed the distraction tonight. Too many dark thoughts were swirling around my head, so many emotions that I felt I would burst. But, despite everything I felt and the crazy emotions churning inside me, it all came back to him.

I found his tent sitting on the edge of camp, farther out from the rest. I didn't know how I knew it was his; all the tents looked basically the same. But I could feel him, as surely as I felt my own heartbeat. For a moment, I hesitated at the entrance, my hand poised to push back the cloth. What would I say to him, the last night we could be alive?

Gathering my courage, I pushed open the flap and stepped inside.

Ash lay on his back in the corner, one arm flung over his eyes, his breathing slow and deep. He was shirtless, and the amulet gleamed against his sculpted chest, almost completely black now, a drop of ink against his pale skin. I was surprised he hadn't heard me come in; the normal Ash would've been up and on his feet with his sword drawn in the blink of an eye. He must've been truly exhausted from our march through the tunnels. Taking advantage of the moment, I watched him, admiring the lean, hard muscles, gazing at the scars slashed across his pale skin. His chest rose

and fell with each quiet breath, and just watching him sleep made me feel a bit calmer.

"How long are you going to keep staring at me?"

I jumped. He hadn't moved, but one corner of his mouth was curved in a slight smile. "How long did you know I was here?"

"I felt you the moment you came to the tent and stood outside, wondering if you should come in." Ash removed his arm and shifted to perch on an elbow, watching me. His expression was solemn now, silver eyes bright in the gloom. "What's wrong?"

I swallowed. "I just…I wanted…oh, dammit…" Blushing, I trailed off, gazing at the floor. "I'm scared," I finally admitted in a whisper. "Tomorrow's the war and we could die and I won't ever see my family again and…and I don't want to be alone tonight."

Ash's gaze softened. Without a word, he shifted back on the cot, making room for me. Heart pounding, I crossed the room and lay down next to him, feeling his arm wrap around my stomach, pulling me close. I felt his heartbeat against my back and closed my eyes, tracing idle patterns on his arm, brushing a faint scar on the back of his wrist.

"Ash?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you scared? Of dying?"

He was quiet a moment, one hand playing with my hair, his breath fanning across my cheek. "Perhaps not in the way you would think," he murmured at last. "I've lived a long time, been in many battles. Of course, there was always that knowledge that I could die, but there have been times I've wondered if I shouldn't give up, let it happen."

"Why?"

"To escape the emptiness. I was dead inside for so long. Not existing didn't seem any different than what I was doing." He buried his face in my shoulder, and I shivered. "It's different now, though. I have something to fight for. I'm not afraid to die, but I don't intend to give up, either." His lips touched my hair, very lightly. "I won't let anything happen to you," he murmured. "You are my heart, my life, my entire existence."

My eyes watered, and my heart thudded in my ears. "Ash," I whispered again, clenching my fists in the quilt to stop the shaking. I knew what I wanted, but I was still afraid, afraid that I wouldn't do it right, afraid of the unknown, afraid that I would somehow disappoint him. Ash kissed the

back of my neck, and I felt his arm tighten, fingers digging into my shirt. I saw a flare of color behind me, bright red desire, felt him tremble as he struggled to control himself, and all my doubts melted away.

I shifted in his arms, rolling toward him so that he was propped on an elbow above me, eyes shining in the darkness. And I let him see the need, the longing, rising up like tendrils of colored smoke to dance with his. I didn't have to say anything. He drew in a quiet breath and lowered his head, touching his forehead to mine.

"Are you sure?" His voice was barely a whisper, a ghost in the dark.

I nodded, tracing my fingers down his cheek, marveling as he closed his eyes. "We could die tomorrow," I whispered back. "I want to be with you tonight. I don't want to have any regrets, when it comes to us. So, yes, I'm sure. I love you, Ash."

My voice was lost then, as Ash closed the final few inches and kissed me. And in the quiet stillness before dawn, on the brink of a war that could tear us apart, our auras danced and twined in the darkness, coiling around each other until they finally merged, becoming one.

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
THE BATTLE FOR FAERY

When I woke, the tent was still dark, though a faint gray light peeked through the flaps. Ash was already gone, typical for him, but my body still glowed from the aftermath of last night. I could feel him now, stronger than ever. He was close. He was—

Right beside me.

I jumped a bit, and turned to see him sitting beside the cot, fully clothed, his sword across his lap, watching me. He wasn't smiling, but his face was relaxed, his eyes peaceful.

"Hey," I whispered, smiling and reaching out to him. His fingers wrapped around mine and he kissed the back of my hand, before standing.

"It's almost time," he said quietly, tucking his sword into his belt again. And the looming war descended like a hammer, shattering the tranquility. "Better get dressed—Glitch will be looking for us. Or worse—"

"Puck," I groaned and struggled upright, searching for my clothes. Ash silently turned his back while I dressed, facing the door, and I bit down a giggle at his chivalry. Once I shrugged into the dragon-scale armor, I turned to show I was ready to follow him out. But Ash crossed the tiny space between us and drew me close, fingers combing my tangled hair, his expression thoughtful.

"I've been thinking…" he mused as I slid my arms around his neck, gazing up at him. "When this is over, let's disappear for a while. Just the two of us. We can check on your family first, and then we can go. I can show you the Nevernever like you've never seen it before. Forget the courts, the Iron fey, everything. Just you and me and nothing else."

"I'd like that," I whispered. Ash smiled, brushed a kiss to my lips, and pulled away.

"That's all I needed to hear." His eyes gleamed, determined and eager, and filled with something I hadn't see before. Hope. "Let's go win a war."

We stepped out of the tent together, not touching, but I didn't need to touch him to feel him, right beside me. He was part of my soul now, and

that somehow made this all the more real. The battle loomed over our heads, close and ominous, made all the more threatening by the eerie red clouds and the ash flakes drifting from them, as if the very sky was falling apart. I gazed up at the sky with a fierce determination. I would win this war. I never wanted anything like this.

"There you are." Glitch emerged from the crowds, dressed for battle with a spear that crackled at the tip, shedding sparks of lightning. "We're almost ready. My scouts have reported the battle has already started, that Summer and Winter have already engaged the false king's forces. The entire army has breached the line into the wyldwood—it looks like this is it."

My blood ran cold. "What about the fortress?"

"Not there yet." Glitch planted the butt of the spear in the ground. "The forest is slowing it down. But it's close. We have to hurry. Where's Goodfellow?"

"Right here." Puck appeared, a smug grin on his face, carrying a long pole beneath his arm. "Been working on something, princess. Last night, I was wondering how the courts were going to tell us apart from the false king's army. Bad Iron fey, good Iron fey—they all look the same to me. Sooooo…" He swept the pole up with a flourish, and a bright green banner snapped open at the top, the silhouette of a great oak splayed proudly across the front. "I wanted to make it a picture of a flower or butterfly," Puck said, smiling at my awed look, "but I didn't think that would strike fear into the heart of the false king."

"Not bad, Goodfellow," Glitch said with grudging respect.

"Oh, so glad you think so, socket-head. My mad crocheting skills finally came in handy for something."

"In any case," Glitch added, rolling his eyes, "we would be proud to carry that into battle for you."

My heart swelled. All these people were willing to follow me, to die to save Faery. I couldn't fail them. I wouldn't.

At that moment, a great commotion came from the edge of the camp, Iron fey shouting in alarm, tents flung aside, and the sound of thundering footsteps. A moment later, the crowds fell back as a group of huge black horses galloped into camp, skidding to a stop before me.

I gasped. They looked like smaller, sleeker versions of Ironhorse, made of black metal with burning crimson eyes and nostrils that breathed flame.

As I stared, one of them stepped forward and tossed his head at me.

"Meghan Chase?" he asked in that same regal, noble air, his deep voice accompanied by a blast of cinders. I blinked rapidly and nodded.

"One called Grimalkin sent us." The Ironhorse look-alike nodded to the others. "He carries with him the spirit of our progenitor, the first Iron Horse, and has compelled us to join you and your cause against the False Monarch. Out of respect for the Great One, we have agreed. Do you accept our assistance?"

Ironhorse, I thought sadly. *You're still helping us, even now.* "I accept your offer," I told the first horse, who nodded regally and bent his foreleg, lowering himself into a bow.

"Then, it is done," he said, as the others bent their front legs and did the same. "For this conflict only, we will carry you and your officers into battle. Afterward, our contract is done, and you will release us."

"Oh, goodie," Puck said as I stepped forward. "I'm going to have a rash in the most uncomfortable places."

I swung onto the horse's back, feeling thick iron muscles shift under me as he rose, clanking and groaning. His metallic skin was warm to the touch, especially near my legs, as if a great fire burned inside him. I remembered the flames roaring in Ironhorse's belly, visible through his exposed ribs and pistons, and felt another ripple of sadness at his loss.

Ash, Puck, and Glitch watched me from the backs of the metal horses, who snorted flame and tossed their heads, eager and ready. The banner was hoisted up, the black oak against a background of green flapping in the wind. I gazed out over the solemn, upturned faces and took a deep breath.

"Summer and Winter are not your enemies!" I called, my voice echoing into the silence. "They are different, yes, but they are fighting the enemy that you hate—a tyrant who seeks to destroy everything King Machina stood for. We cannot abandon them now! Peace with the courts is possible, but the false king will corrupt and enslave everyone if he wins. The only thing necessary for evil to conquer is for us and those like us to do nothing, and I will not sit by and let that happen! We will take this fight to the false king, and we will show him what happens when we stand united against him! Who is with me?"

The roar of the army was like a sudden tornado, as hundreds of voices rose up as one. I drew my sword and raised it over my head, adding to the sea of weapons flashing in the light.

“Let’s go win a war!”

I HEARD THE SOUNDS of the battle before I saw it. They echoed through the trees that marked the edge of the Iron Realm: shouts and screams, howls of fury, and weapons clashing in the wind. Every so often there was the boom of gunfire, or the thunderous roar of flame. Above the tree line, a huge emerald dragon swooped into the air, paused a moment, then dove out of sight again.

Spikerail, the horse I was riding, snorted and tossed his head. “The battle has already been joined,” he announced, nearly prancing with excitement. “Shall we give the order to charge?”

“Not yet,” I replied, putting a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Let’s get through the trees, at least. I want to see the battle, first.”

He pawed the ground impatiently, but kept his pace to a fast walk as we entered the forest. The metal trunks closed around us, dark and twisted, smelling of rust and battery acid. Above the clash of battle, I heard something else in the woods—a great snapping and groaning, as if something huge were pushing through the trees.

“Faster,” I told Spikerail, and he broke into a trot, stirring up clouds of ash as we moved through the forest. The sounds of battle drew closer.

And then the trees fell away, and we were gazing down on mass chaos.

I’d seen the fey in battle twice now, but this seemed even more vicious, more desperate, as if hell itself had been released onto the field. Troops swarmed each other like ants, hacking with ancient and modern weapons, blades and armor glinting in the swirling ash storm. Iron beetles lumbered through the mobs, the gunmen on their backs blasting away. Creatures plunged and dove through the air; an icy-blue dragon, its scales streaked with red, landed on the back of an iron bug, blasted the musket elves with a deadly spray of frost before they could react, and swooped away again. A gryphon, darting by with an elfin rider, was snatched out of the air by a clockwork golem and smashed against a rock. Two metallic praying mantises double-teamed a Summer knight, slashing at him with their massive, curved blades, until he slipped in the ash and was instantly beheaded.

The battle wasn’t going well, it seemed. There was a lot more silver and gray on the field than green and gold, blue and black.

“Looks like we got here just in time,” Puck mused beside me. “Ready for the ‘here comes the cavalry’ charge, princess?”

“If we hit their right flank,” Ash said, observing the battle with narrowed silver eyes, “we may surprise them where their line is thin and tear through them before they can react.”

I met both their gazes, fierce, protective, blazing with determination and love, and felt no fear. Well, maybe a little fear, but it was swallowed by resolve and the almost painful need to win this fight. Drawing my blade, I wheeled Spikerail to face the army—*my* army, truth be told—and looked out over the taut, waiting forces.

“For Faery!” I called, raising my sword, and the rebels took up the cry. A few hundred voices rose into the air, roaring, cheering, stabbing their weapons skyward. My adrenaline soared as the crescendo echoed around me, and I howled again, adding my voice to the mix. With a shrill whinny, Spikerail reared, pawing the air, and plunged down the slope.

Wind whipped at my hair and ash swirled around me, stinging my eyes. My ears were filled with pounding hoof-beats and the roar of the army behind us. We neared the ocean of battle, the rise and fall of soldiers like waves on the shore, the scream and clash of weapons, and roared as we came in, like a hurricane coming to land. The false king’s army turned just as we hit them, their eyes going wide, desperately readying to meet this new threat, but by then it was too late. We slammed into them with the force of a tidal wave, swift and vengeful, and all hell broke loose around me.

Spikerail plunged through the masses, blasting and breathing flame, powerful hooves lashing out at those who got too close. I struck out from his back, stabbing at the false king’s army with my sword. Everything was chaos. I was vaguely aware of Ash and Puck fighting close to me, fending off attacks from all sides. I saw Ash stab one Iron knight through the chest and hurl an ice spear through another. I saw Puck throw what looked like a fuzzy golf ball at a group of Iron knights, where it erupted into an angry grizzly. Glitch whirled his spear in a deadly circle, lightning arcing from the tip, stabbing the point through the knights’ armor to fry them to blackened husks.

Where’s Oberon? I wondered, blocking a spear thrust at my face, kicking the knight away. I had to find him, to tell him that the rebels were not the enemy, that they were here to help. I spotted Glitch through a lull in the fighting and nudged Spikerail in his direction. If Glitch was there as well, to explain himself and his actions, perhaps Oberon would listen.

“Glitch!” I called as we drew close. “Come with m—”

A bellow interrupted us, and a huge clockwork golem plowed through the ranks, swinging its club and sending rebels flying. It caught Glitch by surprise, and the rebel leader tried to dodge, too late. The metal club caught his horse’s shoulder and knocked both of them several feet through the air. I screamed, but my voice was lost in the cacophony, and the golem lumbered closer to the motionless Glitch, raising its club for the killing blow.

Ash suddenly wheeled his horse around and charged the golem, hurling an ice dagger that shattered off the metal skull, making its head snap up. Roaring, it swung at Ash, and my heart leaped to my throat as the huge club came swooshing down. But at the last moment, Ash sprang from his mount’s back and landed on the golem’s arm, running up to its shoulder. As the golem pulled back with a roar, thrashing and flailing, the Ice Prince raised his sword and stabbed it through the construct’s neck. There was a flash of blue light, and the golem bellowed, falling to its knees. Ash leaped off the giant, landing on his feet in the grass, as the golem shuddered and collapsed into a hundred pieces of frozen clockwork, rolling through the ashes.

“I’m not impressed, ice-boy!” Puck yelled, kicking away an Iron knight. “Do that again, only this time, make it dance!”

Ignoring Puck, I turned Spikerail and hurried over to where Glitch had fallen. His horse lay in an ash drift, struggling to get up, and Glitch lay a few feet away, his spikes snapping feebly.

“Glitch!” I leaped off Spikerail’s back and ran to the prone figure, kneeling beside him in the ashes. “Are you all right? Talk to me.” Ash and Puck loomed to either side, protecting us from surrounding chaos. I reached down and shook his limp arm. “Glitch!”

He groaned and cracked open his eyes. “Ow,” he moaned. “Dammit, what hit me?” He tried sitting up and winced, grabbing his arm. “Ouch. That’s not good.”

“Can you stand?” I asked anxiously.

He nodded and tried to get up, but gasped and sank back again, gritting his teeth. “Nope. Ribs broken, as well. Sorry, highness.” Glitch swore and shook his head. “I might have to sit this one out.”

“That’s fine. We just have to get you out of here.” I looked around, flinching as Puck leaped between me and a clockwork hound, cutting the

dog out of the air. I spotted Glitch's horse, finally on his feet though looking a bit dazed, and gave a shrill whistle. "Coaleater!" I yelled, remembering the horse's name. "Over here!

The horse limped up, and we helped Glitch heave himself onto its back. "Take him to safety," I told the horse, who bobbed his head in consent, seemingly glad to get out of the fight. "Make sure he gets the help he needs. I'll take it from here."

"Meghan." Glitch's voice, though reedy with pain, was firm. The rebel leader gazed down at me and nodded, once. "I was wrong about you. Good luck. Win this war for us."

"I will," I replied, as Coaleater moved carefully but swiftly out of sight, disappearing into the swirling ash. Now it was the three of us, just like before. Puck and Ash pressed close, and I narrowed my eyes, peering through the whirling bodies. "Let's find Oberon, right now."

I threw myself back into the fight, Puck and Ash right beside me. Together, we carved our way through the seemingly endless ranks of Iron fey. Sweat ran into my eyes, my dragon-scale armor took a hundred or so painful bangs and scrapes, and my arms burned from swinging my sword, but we continued to fight, inching our way across the field. I became lost in the dance: block, swing, parry, dodge, stab, repeat, always moving on, always pressing forward. An iron beetle bore down on us, muskets firing, and I drew on the Iron glamour to tear the bolts from its legs at the joints, fighting the nausea that overtook me right after. The beetle crashed to the ground and was quickly overrun. Another clockwork giant stumbled into our midst, and this time both Ash and Puck went after it, Puck turning into a raven and pecking at its eyes, while Ash darted around and leaped onto its back, plunging his blade through its chest. Glamour swirled around me, Iron, Summer, and Winter, though the magic of the Iron fey was much stronger here. I could feel it, pulsing through the land, lending strength to both the rebels and the forces of the false king. I could feel the core of the Iron glamour drawing closer, pulsing and angry, corrupting everything in its path.

For just a moment, I was distracted, and that was long enough for something to slip through my guard. The tip of a spear cut through my defenses and slammed me in the shoulder, not enough to pierce the dragon-scale, but hard enough to rock me back and send a flare of pain up my arm. I dropped my sword, and the knight pulled back for another shot.

A huge, gnarled fist closed over his head, crushing the helmet like a grape and lifting the knight high into the air. I gaped as a monstrous, treelike being with thick, thorny skin and a crown of antlers flung the knight away, then turned to knock back a whole platoon with its treelike limbs. Grasses and flowers bloomed briefly where it stepped, as the great tree creature moved forward with surprising speed and grace, looming above my head, as if to protect me. Then its gaze swept down, and I was staring into the ancient, familiar face of the Summer King.

"You've returned." Oberon's voice shook the ground, deeper and lower than a thunderclap, and just as emotionless. The Seelie King gave no hint as to what he was feeling, if he felt anything when he saw me. "And you have brought more Iron fey to our territory."

"They're here to help us!" I yelled, snatching my sword and glaring up at him. He gazed back with impassive green eyes, and I stabbed a finger in his direction. "Don't you dare turn on them, Father! They want the same thing you do!"

Oberon blinked, and I realized I had just called him *father.* Well, I *was* the Summer princess; it was useless to deny it any longer. "I make no promises," the Seelie King said, and turned away, his giant limbs crushing another pair of Iron knights. "We shall see, after the battle, what to do with the intruders."

Furious, I snarled a curse and turned on the Iron knight trying to rush me from behind. Stupid, unreasonable, uncompromising faeries! He'd better not try anything with the rebels when this was done. I'd given my word that they would be safe from him and Mab.

I stabbed my sword through the chest of an Iron knight, watched the empty armor clatter to the ground, and looked up for the next enemy. Only to find there wasn't one. I looked around to see the false king's forces pulling back, running away. As a tired cheer rose up from the army around us, I looked up to see Oberon, surrounded by the remains of countless Iron fey, crush a final golem into scrap metal and turn to me. A shiver went through the Summer King. He began shrinking, growing smaller and less…thorny…until he was as I remembered him. But his eyes, and the inflexibility on his face, remained.

"Why have you brought them here?" Oberon demanded, his cold gaze going to the rebels at my back. "More Iron fey to poison the land, more Iron fey that would destroy us."

“No!” I stepped forward, instinctively shielding them behind me. “I told you before, they’re here to help. They want the false king gone, just like you.”

“And what then? Offer them sanctuary within our courts? Let them go back to the Iron Realm, so that it may continue to spread and corrupt our home?” Oberon seemed to grow in stature, though his size remained the same. The rebels murmured and cringed back as the Seelie King swept his arm over the crowd. “*Every* Iron fey, whether they are hostile or peaceful, is a danger to us. We will *never be safe* while they are alive. This is why we asked you to go into their realm and destroy the Iron King. You have failed us. And now, all of Faery will perish because of you.”

“I gave my word that they would be safe here!” I shouted, feeling Ash and Puck step up beside me. “If you attack them, you’ll make me your enemy, as well! And I don’t think you can afford an attack on two fronts, Father.”

“The girl is right.” A blast of icy cold, and Mab the Winter Queen swept up, her white battlegown streaked with splashes of red and black. “We waste time arguing here while our home is being destroyed around us. Let the rogue fey fight with us—there will be time later to decide their fate.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, either, but in another moment, it didn’t matter. A loud grinding, ripping sound echoed across the field, coming from the edge of the woods, like thousands of trees were being snapped at once. Branches shook violently, swaying like reeds in the wind, and my heart lurched as the massive bulk of the fortress broke through the edge of the woods, crushing trees beneath it, and dragged itself onto the field.

Up close, the false king’s fortress was even larger than I’d thought, casting a looming shadow across the battleground and blocking out the sky. Again, I was struck by how irregular it was, an accumulation of different parts—smokestacks, towers, balconies—thrown into place with no care as to how it looked, yet somehow held together. Smoke leaked from every crevice, billowing into the sky, and the entire thing moved forward with a cacophony of clanks and groans and squeals, sending chills down my spine.

As the armies of Summer and Winter drew back in shock from the monstrous structure, Ash grabbed my arm and pointed to the ground

beneath it. “Look!” he said, his voice filled with horror and disbelief. “Look at what’s carrying it!”

I gasped, hardly comprehending what I saw. The fortress was being carried on the shoulders of hundreds, maybe thousands, of packrats. They shuffled forward in a daze, their eyes blank and glassy, moving across the field like ants with a giant grasshopper.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, stumbling back a step. “They don’t know what they’re doing. The false king must have enchanted them somehow.”

“Uh, enchanted or not, they’re not stopping,” Puck observed, looking nervous as the huge fortress crawled forward, moving at a slow but steady pace through the falling ash. “If we’re gonna get inside that thing and stop the false king, now would be a great time.”

“Attack!” roared Oberon, sweeping his arm toward the moving citadel. “All forces, stop that castle! Do not let it cross the lines!”

The armies surged forward again, both my Iron fey and the oldbloods, uncaring that they were suddenly fighting side by side. In the face of a much greater evil, they hurled themselves at the fortress, their battle cries rising into the air as one.

A flash of smoke and fire erupted from the fortress, and a moment later the explosion of a cannonball rocked the ground, sending several flying. Suddenly the air was filled with explosions, as the fortress opened fire on the advancing fey. Howls and screams rose into the air, and from the woods, coming from behind the fortress, another regiment of the false king’s swarmed onto the field.

“Reinforcements!” I gasped as the new army slammed into our forces. Drawing my sword, I turned to Ash and Puck. “Let’s go. One way or another, we have to get into that fortress.”

We charged the field, joining our allies in trying to hold the line. But the false king’s army was new and fresh, and most of our forces were already exhausted. More and more of our soldiers fell under the relentless push of the false king’s army, and the fortress continued to creep forward, peppering the ground with cannonballs and explosions. We were being pushed back. We were giving ground.

With a roar, the green Summer dragon swooped overhead, its shadow flashing over us, and landed on the castle, talons digging into the side. Snarling, the dragon ripped and tore at the fortress walls, smashing

cannons and breathing fire at the faeries manning them. For a moment, my heart leaped with hope.

But then, the metal towers atop the castle glowed blue-white with energy, and an arc of lightning leaped outward, slamming into the dragon. The dragon screeched, going rigid, as more strands of deadly electricity coursed over and through it, lighting up the sky. It finally dropped off the castle, trailing smoke from its blackened scales, and crashed to the ground. It didn't move again.

My spirits plummeted. We couldn't do it. If a freaking *dragon* couldn't get into the fortress, what chance did I have? Shearing through a wireman, I looked around the field and my heart dropped even lower. There didn't seem to be many good guys left. Oberon was back in his tree-giant form, flinging soldiers left and right, and Mab was an icy whirlwind of death, surrounded by frozen corpses and suits of armor, but I couldn't see much of our army through the masses of Iron knights and other false-king soldiers. Worse, they appeared to have us surrounded.

An explosion shook the ground, very close, and I staggered backward, showered with rocks and dirt. Ash and Puck stood back-to-back, fending off attacks from all sides, but they were being pushed back, as well. A cold numbness spread through my body. We were going to lose. I couldn't get into the fortress, couldn't beat the false king. His army was too much for us. We had failed. I had failed.

"Master!"

Something small and fast leaped at me. I reacted instinctively and swatted it from the air, smashing it to the ground.

"Ouch."

"Razor!" I scooped up the gremlin, holding him at arm's length to see him clearly. He buzzed with joy. "What are you doing here? I told you to go to Mag Tuiredh. Why did you follow me?"

"Razor help! Help Master! Wanted to find you!"

"I know, but I needed you to get the others!" Despair rose up like a wave, and I shook him, angry and frustrated. He squeaked. "Why didn't you go to Mag Tuiredh? Why didn't you do what I asked? Now we're all going to die!"

"No die!" Razor squirmed from my grasp, hitting the dirt to bounce around my feet. "No die, no! Razor did what Master wanted! Look!"

He pointed. From the edge of the woods, over the roar of explosions and screams of battle, I saw thousands of tiny green lights. Eyes, all staring at me. I gasped, and as one, they all broke into a smile, neon-blue crescent grins floating in the air.

They spilled from the woods like a rush of ink, black against the ash-covered ground, thousands upon thousands of gremlins, flowing toward the castle. They swarmed over and around the Iron soldiers like rocks in a stream, unhindered and unstoppable. Several fey lashed out at them, and several gremlins fell, left behind by the mass, but there were just too many of them to stop. They scurried up to the fortress and leaped onto its walls, swarming it like army ants or hornets. Lightning flashed, blasting them from the walls, and gremlins fell like rain, but there were always more, hissing and buzzing, and suddenly, the entire fortress shuddered to a halt.

Razor laughed, clamping on to my leg. “See?” he crowed, crawling up to my shoulder. “We help! Razor help! Razor did good?”

I pried him off me and kissed the top of his head, ignoring the rather violent static shock I received. “You did awesome. Now, get to safety. I’ll take it from here.” He buzzed happily and darted off, vanishing into the crowd.

I took a deep breath and looked around. Ash and Puck had broken away from the main fighting to shield me from the masses coming forward. We were going to have to break through those lines, and quickly.

“Ash! Puck!” They whirled toward me, and I pointed forward. “The fortress defenses are down! I’m going in!”

“Hold!” Mab appeared before us, beautiful and frightening, her hair whipping about like snakes. “I will open a path for you,” she said, turning toward the raging battlefield. “This will take the last of my power, so be sure not to waste it, half-breed. Are you ready?”

Still reeling from the shock that Mab was helping me, I nodded. The Winter Queen raised her hand, and I felt glamour swirling around her, raw and powerful. She swept her arm down, and a blast of freezing, icicle-strewn wind shot forward, ripping into the crowd, pelting them with shards as sharp as razors. Iron fey screeched and fell back, blinded, covering their eyes and faces, and a path opened before us, leading straight to the castle.

“Go,” Mab hissed, her voice slightly strained, and we didn’t hesitate. Gripping my sword, with Ash leading and Puck close behind, we charged into the hole.

The fortress loomed overhead, still flashing and spitting lightning as the gremlins swarmed over it. The packrats seemed frozen in place, eyes blank, faces slack, unaware of the battle going on around them. They didn't react as we reached the base of the castle and Ash leaped onto the edge.

I held my breath, praying he wouldn't get blasted off like the dragon, but there were so many gremlins scurrying about, the defenses didn't even notice us. Still, lightning flashed all around us, smelling of ozone and burning flesh, as Ash pulled me up and we pressed ourselves against the wall. Gremlins fell around us, charred and blackened, and I pressed my face into his shoulder.

"A door, a door, my kingdom for a door," Puck muttered.

"There," Ash said, pointing to a balcony several yards above us. "Come on. We'll have to climb."

Scaling the walls wasn't difficult, though it was extremely nerve-racking with all the lighting and the shrieks of dying gremlins. But we reached the balcony in a short amount of time. A small iron door stood nestled in an alcove next to the railing, and I started toward it, eager to get out of the lightning storm. But before I was halfway across the balcony, the entire fortress trembled, like a dog shaking off water, and lurched into motion. I stumbled forward, slamming my shoulder into the door. It wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I wrenched the handle or threw myself against it.

"Dammit!" Puck yelped, ducking as a deadly bolt of electricity slashed down nearby, making my skin crawl. "We're gonna have to find another way in, unless someone happens to have a key!"

The key! Reaching up, I yanked the chain from my neck and shoved the iron key into the hole beneath the handle, praying it would work. I heard a soft click, and slammed myself into the door once again, just as the fortress lurched forward. This time, the door flew inward, and I tumbled over the threshold, Puck and Ash close behind me. Then it slammed shut with a clang, trapping us inside the fortress of the false king.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
THE FALSE KING

Panting, I looked around us, grabbing a pipe to keep steady as the fortress shook and bounced and trembled, trying to buck the intruders off its back. The inside of the false king's fortress looked much like the outside, thrown together with no thought to architectural soundness, or anything that made sense, really. Stairways ran into walls, doors hung from the ceiling, and hallways snaked off to nowhere or curled around themselves. Rooms and floors sat at weird angles, making it difficult to keep your balance, and were filled with strange odds and ends. A tricycle rolled by, banging into a staircase, and a lamp, hanging upside down from the ceiling, flickered erratically.

"Great. The false king's fortress is a giant rabbit hole." Puck ducked as a model plane flew by on a string, barely missing him. "How are we supposed to find anything in this mess?"

I closed my eyes, feeling the dark, Iron glamour pulsing all around me. In Machina's tower, I'd known I would find the Iron King at the very top, close to the sky and the wind, waiting for me. Here, in this crowded, tangled burrow, I could feel him, too. The false king. He knew I was here, an intruder in his private warren. I could feel his glee, his anticipation, as the fortress itself suddenly turned its gaze inward, searching for us. For me.

I shivered and opened my eyes. "He's at the very center," I murmured, looping the chain, the watch, and the lifesaving key around my neck once more. "The heart of the fortress. And he's waiting for us."

"Then let's not keep him," Ash muttered, drawing his sword, which glowed like a beacon in the darkness. Huddled close, we crept forward, into the shadowed, tangled mess of the false king's fortress.

We eased our way between mountains of junk, through rooms that made no sense, dodging trash and low-hanging cables. One time we followed a corridor that led us in a twisted spiral back to where we came. Another time we picked our way through a labyrinth of huge pipes, hissing

steam. All the while, the dark glamour I felt grew stronger, more eager, the closer we came to the center.

And then, very suddenly, the close, crowded walls opened up, and we stumbled into a vast open arena. Thick black pipes held up the ceiling, hissing madly, and metal poles stuck out of the roof, threads of lightning arcing between them, causing the whole place to flicker like a strobe light.

In the center of the open space, an iron chair spiked up from the floor, polished and gleaming. Seated motionless on the throne, a body watched us, but under the flickering lights, it was difficult to see it clearly. Then a strand of lightning leaped from the ceiling and slithered rapidly over the throne, lighting it up like a Christmas tree, and I saw the face of the false king for the first time.

"You!" I gasped. My heart lurched, and my stomach dropped to my toes. Of course, it was him. How could I not have seen it before?

"Hello, Meghan Chase," purred Ferrum, smiling at me. "I have been waiting for you."

* * *

"Ferrum," I whispered, trying to match the figure of the false king with the sad, angry old man I'd met in the packrat tunnels. He was very much the same, withered and bent over, his arms and legs like brittle twigs and his white hair flowing almost to his feet. Voluminous black robes nearly swallowed his frail figure, and a twisted iron crown rested on his forehead, seeming to weigh him down. His skin had that same metallic tone, like he'd been dunked in liquid mercury, and the lightning crawling over his body didn't seem to faze him a bit.

But he glowed with power now, a dark, purplish aura that surrounded him, like it was sucking in all the light. I could feel it pulling at me, trying to drain my life and glamour, suck me dry until I was an empty husk. I shuddered and stepped back, and Ferrum broke into a maniacal grin.

"Yes, you feel it, don't you, girl?" Ferrum raised a claw and beckoned me forward, still smiling. "You feel the void, the vacuum, where my power used to lie. The power of the Iron King. The power you stole from me when you killed Machina!" Ferrum slammed his fist into the chair with a hollow boom, making me jump. I didn't remember him being this strong.

“But now, you are here,” he finished, still gazing at me with those crazy, inhuman eyes. “And I will take back what is rightfully mine. For centuries have I waited for this day, when I can reclaim my throne and my right as king!” He leaned forward, speaking fervently, as if to convince us. “It will be different this time. Machina was right to fear the oldbloods. They will destroy us if we do not put them down first. When I kill you and my power is returned, I will take this land and remake it in my own image, where my subjects and slaves can live in peace, and I can rule as I did before, unopposed and unquestioned.”

“You’re wrong,” I said quietly, as his eyes widened, blazing and feverish. “The power of the Iron King was never yours, not since you lost it to Machina all those years ago. It can be earned, and it can be lost, but it can never be taken. Machina gave it to me. Even if you kill me, you won’t get back your power. You can’t reclaim the past, Ferrum. Let it go. You’ll never be the Iron King again.”

“Silence!” Ferrum screeched, hitting the throne arm again. “Lies! I have waited for this day too long to listen to your filthy half-truths! Guards, guards!”

Clanking footsteps boomed around us, and a platoon of Iron knights appeared, encircling the arena. Ash and Puck pressed close, and we stood back-to-back, weapons drawn, as the knights came to a stop at the edge, surrounding us in a ring of steel.

Ferrum rose from his throne, floating a few feet from the ground like a spindly wraith, his long hair floating around him. “You will not deny me what is rightfully mine,” the false king raged, pointing at me with a long metallic finger. “And your little bodyguards will not stop me from taking it, either. I have some friends of theirs who are dying to see them.”

I wasn’t surprised when the ranks parted and Rowan stepped out on one side, Tertius on the other. The Iron knight looked bored and cold, but Rowan’s grin was inhumanly eager as he drew his sword, spinning it casually as he advanced on Ash.

“Come on, little brother,” Rowan sneered, the flickering light washing over his burned, ravaged face. “I’ve been waiting for this a long time.”

“Meghan.” Ash eased back a step, torn between protecting me and going after Rowan. I softly touched his arm.

“It’s okay.” He gave me a desperate, helpless look, and I smiled encouragingly. “I’ll be all right. This is what we came here for. Keep

Rowan off me, and I'll take care of Ferrum." *I hope.* "Puck, will you be all right?"

"No problem, princess." Puck whirled his daggers, facing off against Ash's doppelganger. The look on his face scared me a little. It was one of pure, savage zeal as Puck bared his teeth in a fearsome smile. "I think I'm gonna enjoy this."

Ash held my gaze. "I can't protect you this time," he whispered. "And I know you're ready for this but, Meghan…be careful," he finished, and I nodded.

"You, too." I stepped back, but he pulled me forward and kissed me, quick and desperate, before turning to face Rowan.

"Go on, then," he said softly, his voice shaking a bit. "Go save us all."

With my head up and my resolve firmly in place, I turned and walked toward the center of the room. This was it. Ash and Puck couldn't help me now. I had to do this on my own.

Ferrum waited for me before his throne, a skeletal wraith-creature, his robes and hair billowing behind him. The screech and clash of weapons echoed behind me as two of the people I loved most in the world fought for their lives, but I didn't turn back to look. My gaze was only for the false king as I stopped a few yards from the throne, my sword held loosely at my side.

Ferrum watched me for a moment, hanging in the air like a vulture, and he broke into a slow, eager smile. "This can be simple and painless, you know," he whispered. "Kneel before me now, and you will not suffer. Your end will be as peaceful as a lullaby, singing you to sleep."

I gripped my sword, swinging it into a ready position as Ash had taught me. "We both know that's not going to happen."

Ferrum smiled. "Very well," he said, and his arms rose away from his sides. I felt him drawing glamour from the fortress, from the poisoned land and even his subjects, sucking the dark power into himself. His fingers flexed, growing long and pointed, turning into gleaming blades. "I prefer it this way, myself." And he flew at me.

He was insanely fast. I barely had time to see him coming, a blur of silver across the floor, before he was in front of me, swiping at my face. I knocked away the stabbing fingers and slashed at him in return, but he was already gone, zipping to the side. I felt his claws strike my armor, and then a blinding pain as they sliced through the scales like paper, cutting into my

arm. I whirled and swiped at him, my blade passing through empty air as Ferrum darted away, clear across the room in a blink.

My arm burned, the silver dragon-scale spattered with red where the false king had cut me. Ferrum drifted closer, slower this time, his mouth twisted in a hungry smile. He knew he was faster than me. I closed out the pain and raised my sword again, and the false king laughed in triumph.

"Is that the best you can do, Meghan Chase? All the power of the Iron King at your fingertips, and you can do nothing. How disappointing." A blink and he was close again, smiling. I threw myself back, but Ferrum didn't press his advantage, shaking his head like a disappointed grandfather.

"You have no idea how to wield that power, do you, girl? It sits, smoldering inside you, an untapped flood. Or are you just saving it for later?" He was mocking me now, confident in his victory, and that pissed me off. I lunged at him with a snarl, slashing at his face, intending to wipe that ugly sneer from his mouth. He dodged, thrust out a hand, and I was hit with a blast of pure Iron glamour. My sword was torn from my hands. The force knocked me back, sent me tumbling to the edge of the arena, gasping and winded at the feet of the Iron knights. Over the ringing in my ears, I heard Ash's howl of fury and the false king's mocking laughter.

"Get up!" he snapped as I staggered to my knees. I tried, but the floor was spinning and my stomach felt like it had been pulled inside out. The false king barked another laugh. "Pathetic!" he crowed. "You are weak! Weak, to be carrying the power of the Iron King. I don't know what Machina was thinking, to waste it on you! No matter. I will cut it out of your weak human body and use it as it was meant to be used, for the glory of myself and my kingdom."

He raised his hands, claws smeared with my blood, and drifted toward me. Dark, poisonous Iron glamour pulsed all around us, ebbing from the walls and from every shadow of the fortress, feeding him, empowering him. I couldn't beat Ferrum like this. I was going to have to fight fire with fire and hope I wouldn't pass out from the effort.

I gazed across the arena to my sword, lying in the middle of the floor, flickering under the lights. I remembered how I had once twisted the shape of an iron ring, made iron bolts change direction in midair. I remembered how Ferrum made his own fingers change, becoming deadly and sharp, and concentrated on my weapon, seeing the Iron glamour in my mind. The

sword glowed white-hot, stretched, and lengthened, turning from a sword to a spear. Nausea rose up as my Summer magic reacted violently to the Iron glamour, cramping my stomach and making the room spin, but I bit my lip and gave the magic one last, desperate pull.

Ferrum was right over me, his claws poised to end my life, when the spear flew from the floor, streaked across the room, and hit him from behind. I saw it erupt from his chest, striking the armor of one of the knights, and I scrambled away as Ferrum arched back with a scream, clutching the spear through his middle.

Staggering to the center of the arena, I collapsed as the nausea overtook me, gasping and trying not to retch. It was over. We had won, somehow. Now all we had to do was get past Rowan and Tertius, and make it back to our side. Hopefully, the Iron knights would let us go now that Ferrum was dead—

High-pitched, frantic laughter stopped me in my tracks.

When I raised my head, my blood ran cold. Ferrum was still standing, the spear through his chest, glamour snapping and flaring around him like a thunderstorm. “You think you can defeat me with iron, Meghan Chase?” he howled. “I *am* iron! I was the first Iron fey born into this world—it runs in my veins, my blood, my very essence! Your pathetic use of Iron glamour only makes me stronger!”

Reaching down, he pulled the spear from his chest in one smooth, contemptuous motion. I struggled upright as the false king rose into the air, hair and clothes whipping around him in the gale. “Now,” Ferrum droned, lifting the spear above his head, “it is time to end this.”

Lightning arced from the ceiling to the tip of the spear, lancing down and crackling around the false king. I felt my hair stand up, rising away from my neck, as Ferrum lifted his other hand and pointed at me.

There was a blinding flash. Something slammed into my chest, and the noise of the world cut out, as abruptly as if someone had switched off a television.

Everything went white.

* * *

“YOU CANNOT BEAT HIM.”

Blinking, I squinted against the glare, shielding my eyes as I gazed around. All around me, everything was white. No ground, no shadows, nothing but a blank white void as empty as space.

But I knew he was here, with me.

"Where are you, Machina?" I asked, my voice echoing into the emptiness.

"I have always been here, Meghan Chase," was Machina's reply, coming from everywhere and nowhere. "I was given to you, freely and without constraint. It is you who has rejected me every time."

That didn't make any sense, and I shook my head to clear it, trying to remember where I was. "Where is everyone? Where is…Ferrum! I was fighting Ferrum. I have to get back. Where is he?"

"You cannot beat him," Machina said again. "Not the way you are fighting. He is the essence of Iron's corruption, feeding off the land like a bloated tick. His power is too great, and you cannot defeat him with Iron glamour alone."

"I'm going to have to try," I said angrily. "I don't have a magic Witchwood arrow to kill him like I did you. I just have myself."

"The Witchwood arrow was only a conduit for your own Summer glamour. It was powerful, yes, but it only worked because you are Oberon's daughter, and his living, healing Summer blood flows through you. In essence, you injected the Iron King with your own Summer magic, and my body could not take it. It is the same with Ferrum."

"Well, I can't do that anymore. Every time I use Summer magic, the Iron gets in the way. I can't use one without the other tainting it. I can't win like that. I can't—" Close to despair, I sank to my knees, burying my face in one hand. "I have to win," I whispered. "I have to. Everyone is depending on me. There must be a way to use my Summer magic. Dammit, my father is the Summer King, there has to be a way to separate __"

And then it hit me.

I remembered my father. Not the Seelie King—my human father, Paul. I could see us sitting at the old piano, while he tried to explain how music worked. I could see the Iron glamour in the notes, the strict lines and rigid rules that made up the score, but the music itself was a vortex of song and pure, swirling emotion. They weren't separate entities, creative magic and

Iron glamour. They were one; cold logic and wild emotion, merged together to create something truly beautiful.

"Of course," I whispered, reeling from the understanding. "I was using them separately, of course they reacted to each other. That's what you were trying to tell me, wasn't it? This power—me, you, Summer and Iron glamour—I can't use one or the other. They're useless separated. I have to…make them one."

It was so simple, now that I thought about it. Paul had shown me they could combine; it was nothing new. This was why Machina gave his power to me—I was the only one who could merge them, a half-breed who could wield both Summer and Iron.

I felt a presence behind me, but didn't turn. There would be nothing there if I did. "Are you ready?" Machina whispered. No, not Machina, the manifestation of the Iron glamour, *my* Iron glamour. The magic I had been rejecting, running away from, all this time. Using it, but never really accepting it. That ended today. It was time.

"I'm ready," I murmured, and felt hands on my shoulders, long-fingered and powerful. Steel cables began coiling around me, around us, tightening as they slithered over my skin. About the time they stabbed into me, wiggling under my skin and crawling up toward my heart, I closed my eyes. Machina's presence was fading away, growing fainter and fainter, though right before he vanished altogether, he bent close and whispered in my ear:

"You've always had the power to defeat the false king. He is a corrupter, a life-taker, poisoning everything he touches. He will try to drain your magic by force. You can defeat him, but you must be brave. Together, we can restore this land."

The cables finally reached my heart, and a jolt like an electrical current slammed into my body, as all that was left of the Iron King faded completely and was gone.

* * *

I GASPED AND OPENED MY EYES.

I was in Ferrum's chamber, lying on my back, watching the lightning threads dance over the ceiling. Only a few seconds must have passed since Ferrum hit me, as the false king was still standing in the middle of the

arena with his arm outstretched. Beyond him, I could just make out Ash and Puck, still locked in battle with their opponents. Ash was shouting something, but his voice blurred in my ears, coming from far away. I felt dizzy, numb, and my skin tingled, as if all my limbs were asleep, but I was alive.

Something light slithered over my neck, tickling my skin. I reached up and felt cold metal; the pocket watch the Clockmaker had given me, so long ago. Lifting it up, I saw immediately that there was no saving it; the electricity had cracked the glass and melted the edges of the gold casing. The delicate hands were frozen in place. From the looks of the damage, it seemed the timepiece had taken the full brunt of the lightning bolt, one hundred and sixty-one hours from the time the Clockmaker had given it to me.

Thank you, I told him silently, and unlooped the chain from my neck, letting the watch clatter to the ground.

Ferrum's eyes widened as I struggled to my knees, then my feet, fighting to stay upright as the floor lurched and spun. "Still alive?" he hissed as I shook off the last of the dizziness and faced him, clenching my fists. Everything was clearer now. I could feel the Iron glamour of the fortress pulsing all around me, and the black hole that was the false king, sucking it all away. I probed further and sensed the glamour of the Nevernever holding out against the Iron Realm, growing weaker as the Iron Kingdom pressed forward. I could feel the heartbeat of both lands, and the creatures dying on either side.

The power of the Iron King can be given, or can be lost, but it cannot be taken.

I suddenly realized what I had to do.

I trembled, wishing there had been more time—that Ash and I could've had more time. If I'd known, I might've done things differently. But beyond that moment of regret, I felt calm, certain, filled with a resolve that pushed back all fear or doubt. I was ready. There was no other way.

I looked at Ferrum and smiled.

The false king hissed and sent another bolt of lightning at me. I raised my hand, Summer and Iron glamour swirling around me, and knocked it aside, sending it into the wall over Ferrum's head. The energy exploded in a shower of sparks, and Ferrum screeched in rage. For a moment, I held my breath, waiting for the pain and nausea to hit.

Nothing. No pain, no sickness. Summer and Iron glamour had merged perfectly, one no longer tainting the other. I reached out and called my spear to me, ripping it from Ferrum's grasp, grabbing it as it smacked into my palm. Ferrum's eyes bugged, and glamour flared around him like a dark flame. I flourished the spear and sank into a ready stance.

"Come on then, old man," I called, ignoring my pounding heart, the way my hands were shaking. "You throw like a girl. You want my power? Come get it!"

Ferrum rose into the air like a vengeful phoenix, hair and robes snapping behind him. "Insolent child!" he screamed, "I shall not toy with you a moment longer! I will take my power back right now!"

He flew at me, covering the arena floor in a blink, though I saw everything clearly. I watched Ferrum close on me, his face twisted into a mask of rage, lunging forward. I saw those deadly talons, stabbing at my chest. I knew I could block it, step aside…

I'm sorry, Ash.

I closed my eyes instead.

Ferrum hit me square in the gut with the full power of his hate behind it, driving his claws deep into my chest. The force bent me over, punching the breath from my lungs, a moment before fire blossomed through my stomach. The pain was excruciating. I would've gasped, but there was no air left in me. Somewhere far away, I heard Ash scream in rage and fury, Puck's cry of dismay, but then Ferrum stepped forward, pushing his claws in even farther, and everything melted into a red haze of agony.

Bent over the false king's arm, my body shook and convulsed, and I concentrated on not passing out, not giving in to the blackness that crawled at the edge of my vision. It was tempting, so tempting, to give in, to let go of the pain and sink into oblivion. My blood dripped to the floor between us, a growing crimson pool; I could feel my life leaking away, as well.

"Yes," Ferrum whispered in my ear, his breath smelling of rust and rot, "suffer. Suffer for stealing my power from me. For thinking you were worthy to carry it. Now, you will die, and I will become the Iron King once more. The power of the Iron King is mine once again!"

I raised a trembling, blood-soaked hand and grabbed the collar of his robes, raising my head to meet the false king's triumphant gaze. My life was fading fast; I had to be quick. "You want it?" I whispered, forcing the

words out, when all I wanted to do was scream or cry. “Take it. It’s yours.” And I sent my power, the merged glamour of Summer and Iron, into the false king.

Ferrum threw back his head and laughed, swelling with power, his voice ringing through the chamber. Glamour flared around him like a dark fire, and he seemed to swell, to grow as the massive power of the Iron King flowed into him.

Suddenly, it sputtered, the cold black corruption flickering with tongues of green and gold, heat and warmth. Ferrum jerked, eyes going wide with confusion and fear, staring at me in horror.

“What…what are you doing to me? What have you done?” He tried pulling back, but I clamped my fingers around his wrist, holding us together.

“You wanted the Iron King’s power,” I told Ferrum, whose eyes were bulging and crazy now, glamour swirling around him like a colorful vortex, “you can have it. Iron and Summer both. Afraid you can’t separate them, now.” Glamour continued to pour into Ferrum, as I clung to him with my fading strength. “You might’ve killed me, but I swear, I won’t let you touch the Nevernever. Or my family. Or my friends. The Iron King’s reign ends right now.”

Branches erupted from the false king’s chest, twisted and bent, rushing up toward the ceiling, and Ferrum screamed. Ripping his claws from my stomach, he staggered back, clutching at the limbs, trying to tear them out. I fell to my knees, stayed upright for a split second, then collapsed, my head striking the ground with a thump.

Reality blurred, and time seemed to slow. Ferrum writhed and thrashed, his screams filling the chamber as his arms split and turned into branches, his fingers becoming gnarled twigs. I saw Ash, his face frighteningly out of control, slam his brother’s sword away, step forward and plunge his blade through Rowan’s armor, into his chest. A flash of vicious blue, and Rowan arched back, going stiff as if frozen from inside. Ash yanked his sword up and out, and Rowan shattered, falling to the floor in a million glistening pieces.

A howl from the other side of the room showed two Pucks holding Tertius between them, while a third Puck raised his dagger and plunged it into the knight’s chest.

“Damn you.” Ferrum’s voice was a croak, and my attention flickered back to the false king. He was almost gone now, a tiny, gnarled old tree, bent and withered. Only his face showed through the trunk, hateful eyes boring into me. “I thought I’d seen evil in Machina,” he wheezed, “but you are far, far worse. My power, all my power, gone. Wasted.” His voice broke, and he made a noise like a sob before turning a last sneer on me. “At least I can take comfort in the fact that neither of us will have it in the end. You will die soon. Not even the power of the Iron King can save you n —” His voice abruptly cut out, or maybe I lost consciousness for a moment, because the next time I opened my eyes, Ferrum was gone. An ugly, skeletal tree was all that remained of the false king.

The pain was still there, but it was a dull, distant thing now, insignificant. Somewhere far away, someone called my name. At least, I thought it was my name. I blinked, trying to focus, but my thoughts were fuzzy and slipped away like smoke, and I was too tired to call them back.

Closing my eyes, I let myself drift, wanting nothing but the chance to rest. Surely I had earned it by now. Defeating a false king and saving all of Faery—there were certainly worse ways to die. But, even as I hovered on the edge of the void, I could still feel the labored heartbeat of the land, the poisoned trail Ferrum had carved on his journey, and the corruption seeping into the Nevernever. Just because Ferrum was gone didn’t mean the Iron Realm would disappear. The last of the Iron King’s power still flickered inside me, weakly, a candle held up to the wind. It was still my responsibility, this power. What would happen to it when I died? Who would I give it to? Who *could* I give it to, this new glamour of Summer and Iron, without killing them?

“Meghan!” The voice called to me again, and I recognized it now. It was *his* voice, the voice of my knight, frantic and tormented, pulling me back from the void. “Meghan, no!” it pleaded, echoing in the blackness. “Don’t do this. Come on, wake up. Please.” The last word was a desperate, whispered sob, and I opened my eyes.

Ash peered down at me, silver eyes suspiciously bright, his face pale and wan. Cradled in his arms, I blinked as the sounds of the world came back, the crackle of energy above, the shuffle of metal boots from the Iron knights still surrounding us. I spared a quick glance over, and saw that all the knights had laid down their arms and were now watching us with identical grave expressions, waiting.

I looked back to Ash, seeing Puck standing over his shoulder as well, white and pale. “Ash,” I whispered, my voice sounding weak and breathy in my ears. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think…now you’ll fade away because of me, because I asked you to take that vow.”

He pressed his face to my hair, closing his eyes. “If you are gone,” he whispered back, his voice shaking, “then I will welcome nonexistence. There will be nothing left for me to live for.” He pulled back, his silver eyes boring into me. “There’s still time,” he murmured, standing easily with me in his arms. “We have to get you to a healer.”

Puck was suddenly there, intense and angry, his hair a stark contrast to his pale face. “Dammit, Meghan,” he snapped. “What the hell were you thinking? We have to get you out of here, now!” He eyed the ring of knights and his eyes narrowed. “You think the bucket brigade will let us go, or should I carve a path through them?”

“No,” I whispered, clutching Ash’s shirt. They both looked at me in surprise. “I can’t go to a healer. Take me…” I winced and fought a gasp as a bolt of pain clawed my stomach, and Ash’s grip tightened. “Take me to the tree,” I forced out. “The ruins. I have to go back…to where it all began.”

He stared at me, expressionless, but a tremor went through him. “No,” he whispered, but it was more of a plea.

“Princess, there’s no time!” Puck stalked forward, desperate. “Don’t be stupid! If we don’t get you to a healer now, you’ll die!”

I ignored Puck, holding Ash’s gaze, steeling myself for what I had to do. “Ash,” I whispered, tears flooding my eyes. “Please. I don’t have… much time left. This is my last request. I have to…get to that tree. Please.”

He closed his eyes, and a single tear crawled down his cheek. I knew I was asking him to do the impossible, and it was tearing me apart that Ash was suffering. But at least I would make it right in the end. I’d promise him that much.

“Don’t listen to her, prince.” Puck sounded almost frantic then, grabbing Ash by the shoulder. “She’s delirious. Get to a healer, dammit. Don’t tell me you’re going to listen to this insanity.”

“Puck,” I whispered, but suddenly noticed the empty silver chain, dangling from Ash’s chest. The amulet was gone. Where the crystal had once been, only a blackened shard remained. It must’ve finally shattered during the fight with Rowan. My stomach twisted. “Oh, God, Ash,” I

breathed. “The amulet. You won’t be protected in the Iron Kingdom anymore. Have someone else take me back.”

He raised his head, his eyes bleak but determined, a look I’d seen before, when he had nothing left to lose.

“I’ll take you.”

“No, you won’t!” Puck stepped in front of us, and suddenly his dagger was pressed against Ash’s throat. Ash didn’t move, and Puck leaned in, his face savage. “You’ll take her to a healer, prince, or so help me I will cut out that piece of ice you call a heart and take her myself.”

“Puck,” I whispered again, “please.” He didn’t look at me, but tears brimmed at the corners of his eyes, and the hand holding the dagger trembled. “I have t-to do this,” I went on, as Ash and Puck continued their staredown, neither giving an inch. “This…is the only way to save everything. Please.”

He drew in a shaky breath. “How can you ask me to let you die?” he choked, still keeping the blade at the prince’s throat. A thread of blood formed under the knife, and ran down to Ash’s collar. “I’d do anything for you, Meghan. Just…not that. Not that.”

Gently, I reached up and closed my fingers around the knife hilt, easing it down and away from Ash’s neck. Puck resisted for a moment, then stepped back with a sob. The dagger fell from his grip and clanged to the floor.

“Are you sure this is what you want, princess?” His voice was strangled, his eyes begging me to change my mind.

“No,” I whispered, as my own tears spilled over, and the arms around me tightened. Of course it wasn’t. I wanted to live. I wanted to see my family and finish school and travel to distant places I’d only read about. I wanted to laugh with Puck and love with Ash, and do all those things that normal people took for granted. But I couldn’t. I was given this power, this responsibility. And I had to finish what I’d started, once and for all. “No, Puck, it isn’t. But, this is how it has to be.”

Puck took my hand, gripping it as if he could keep me here just by holding on. I looked into his green eyes, shining with emotion, and saw all his years as Fey, all his triumphs and failures, loves and losses. I saw him as Puck, the devilish, legendary troublemaker, and as Robin Goodfellow, a being as ancient as time, with his own scars and wounds gathered in his

immortal life. Puck squeezed my hand, tears running unabashedly down his face, and shook his head.

"Wow," he muttered, his voice choked with tears. "Here we are, the last night and all, and I can't think of anything to say."

I pressed my palm to his cheek, feeling the moisture beneath my fingers, and smiled at him. "How about 'goodbye'?"

"Nah." Puck shook his head. "I make a point of never saying goodbye, princess. Makes it sound like you're never coming back."

"Puck—"

He bent and kissed me softly on the lips. Ash stiffened, arms tightening around me, but Puck slid out of reach before either of us could react. "Take care of her, ice-boy," he said, smiling as he backed up several paces. "I guess I won't be seeing you, either, will I? It was…fun, while it lasted."

"I'm sorry we didn't get to kill each other," Ash said quietly.

Puck chuckled and bent to retrieve his fallen dagger. "My one and only regret. Too bad, that would have been an epic fight." Straightening, he gave us that old, stupid grin, raising a hand in farewell. "See you around, lovebirds."

Glamour rippled through the air, and Puck disintegrated into a flock of screaming ravens, flapping wildly as they scattered to all corners of the room. The knights ducked as the birds swooped over their heads, cawing in their harsh, mocking voices. Then the birds vanished into the darkness, the sound of wings disappeared, and Puck was gone.

* * *

THE KNIGHTS LET US THROUGH without a fight, bowing their heads as we passed. Some of them even raised their swords, as if in salute, but I didn't really notice much. Cradled gently in Ash's arms, my body and mind numb to everything, I concentrated on not falling asleep, knowing if I did, I might never open my eyes. Soon I could rest, give in to the exhaustion claiming my body, lie back and forget it all, but I had one last thing to do. And then I could finally let it all go.

Soft flakes touched my cheek, and I looked up.

We were outside the fortress now, standing at the top of a flight of stairs, gazing down at the field. The sounds of battle had ceased, and

silence hung over the field as every eye, be it Summer, Winter, or Iron, turned in my direction. Everyone was frozen, staring at me in shock, unsure of what to do.

Ash never stopped, walking deliberately forward, his face unreadable, and the ranks of Summer, Winter, and Iron fey parted for him without a word. Faces passed by me, silent in the falling ash. Diode, his whirling eyes wide with alarm. Spikerail and his herd, lowering their heads as we walked by. Gremlins trailed us, hushed and grim, weaving their way through the crowd.

Mab and Oberon came into view, their eyes at once blank and sympathetic. Ash didn't stop, even for Mab. He marched by the faery rulers without even a glance, continuing through the gray drifts, until we reached the edge of the field and the huge frost dragon waiting for us. The dragon shifted, settling back to stare at the Winter prince with ice-blue eyes.

"Take us into the Iron Realm." Ash's voice was soft, but several degrees below freezing, leaving no room for argument. "Now."

The dragon blinked. Hissing softly, it turned and crouched low, stretching its long neck for Ash to get on. Without so much as a jolt, Ash stepped onto a scaly forearm and leaped up between the dragon's shoulders, settling me in his lap. As the dragon rose up, spreading its wings to launch, Razor let out a buzzing cry, and the gremlins exploded into shrill, high-pitched wailing, leaping up and down and pulling at their ears. Though startled, no one moved to stop them, and their keening voices followed us into the air, until the wind swallowed them up.

* * *

I DIDN'T REMEMBER FLYING. I didn't remember landing. Just a soft thump as Ash slid off the dragon's back onto solid ground again. Raising my head from his chest, I gazed around. The landscape was blurred and fuzzy, like a fading, out-of-focus camera, until I realized it was me and not the surroundings. Everything was gray and dark, but I could still make out the tree, the great iron oak, rising from the tower ruins to brush the sky.

Behind us, the dragon made a low rumble that sounded like a question. "Yes, go," Ash murmured without turning around, and there was a blast of wind that signaled the dragon had fled, back to the Nevernever where it

wouldn’t be poisoned. I noted, in my numb state of mind, that Ash didn’t tell it to wait for him.

Because he wasn’t planning to leave, either.

Ash’s step was firm as he carried me through the tower, drifting through the empty ruins, slipping through the shadows, until we reached the base of the tree. Only when we stepped into the central chamber and the branches loomed above us did he start to tremble. But his voice was steady, and his grip didn’t loosen as he approached the trunk and stopped, lowering his head to mine.

“We’re here,” he murmured. I closed my eyes and reached out with my remaining glamour, feeling the pulsing heart of the tree and the roots, extending deep into the earth.

“Lay me down…at the base,” I whispered.

He hesitated, but then stepped beneath the tree and knelt, depositing me gently on the ground between two giant roots. And he stayed there, kneeling beside me, holding my hand in his. Something splashed the back of my hand, cold as spring water, crystallizing to my skin. A faery’s tears.

I gazed up at him and tried for a smile, tried to be brave, to show him that none of this was his fault. That this was how it had to be. His eyes glimmered in the darkness, bright and anguished. I squeezed his hand.

“It was…quite a ride, wasn’t it?” I whispered, as my own tears ran down my cheek, staining the hard ground. “I’m sorry, Ash. I wish…we had more time. I wish…I could’ve gone with you…but things didn’t quite work out, did they?”

Ash brought my hand to his lips, his eyes never leaving mine. “I love you, Meghan Chase,” he murmured against my skin. “For the rest of my life, however long we have left. I’ll consider it an honor to die beside you.”

I took a deep breath, chasing back the darkness on the edge of my vision. Now came the hardest part, the part I’d been dreading. I didn’t want to die, and even more, I didn’t want to die alone. The thought made my stomach clench, and my breath come in short, panicked gasps. But Ash would not fade away. I would not let him die because of his vow. This was the last unselfish thing I could do for him. He had been with me every step of the way; now it was my turn to set him free.

“Ash.” I reached up and touched his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw. “I love you. Never forget that. And I…I wanted to live the rest of my life

with you. But…" And I paused, trying to catch my breath. It was getting hard even to speak, and Ash's outline was fading at the edges. I blinked hard to keep him in focus.

"But I…I can't let you die because of me," I continued, seeing understanding dawn in his eyes, followed by alarm. "I won't allow it."

"Meghan, no."

"It's all right if you hate me," I continued, speaking faster so he couldn't change my mind. "In fact, that might be for the best. Hate me, so you can find someone…someone else to love. But I want you to live, Ash. You have so much to live for."

"Please." Ash gripped my hand, "Don't do this."

"I release you," I whispered. "From your vow of knighthood, and the promises you made. Your service to me is done, Ash. You're free."

Ash bowed his head, shoulders heaving. I swallowed the bitter lump in my throat, my stomach churning painfully. It was done. I hated myself for it, but it was the right thing to do. I'd asked so much of him already. Even if he was prepared to die, I wasn't going to let that happen.

"Now," I said, releasing his hand. "Get out of here, Ash. Before it's too late."

"No."

"Ash, you can't stay. The amulet is gone. If you're here much longer, you'll die."

Ash said nothing. But I knew that stubborn set of his shoulders, the flare of resolve around him, and I knew he would stay with me regardless. And so, I did the only thing I could think of. He would curse the day he met the human girl in the wyldwood, vow to never, ever, fall in love again. But he would live.

"Ashallyn'darkmyr Tallyn," I said, and he closed his eyes, "by the power of your True Name, leave the Iron Realm right now." I turned my head so I wouldn't see him, forcing out the last words. "And don't come back."

I'm so sorry, Ash. But please, live for me. If anyone deserves to come out of this alive, it's you.

A soft noise, almost a sob. Ash rose, hesitated, as if fighting the compulsion to obey. "I will always be your knight, Meghan Chase," he whispered in a strained voice, as if every moment he remained was painful to him. "And I swear, if there is a way for us to be together, I will find it.

No matter how long it takes. If I have to chase your soul to the ends of eternity, I won't stop until I find you, I promise."

And then he was gone.

Alone at the base of the giant oak, I lay back, fighting the urge to cry, to scream out my fear and desolation. There was no time for that anymore. The world was getting dark, and I had one last thing I had to do.

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my glamour, feeling both Summer and Iron rise up in response. Cautiously, I probed the roots of the giant oak, following them deep into the cracked, dry earth, sensing the devastation of the land around it. The Iron glamour that was killing one species but sustaining another.

I thought of my family. Of Mom and Luke and Ethan, still waiting for me at home. I thought of my human dad, Paul, and my real father, the Summer King. Of everyone I had met along the way: Glitch, the rebels, Razor. Ironhorse. They were of the Iron Kingdom, but they were still fey. They deserved a chance to live, just like everyone else.

I thought of Grimalkin, and Puck. My wise teacher and my brave, loyal best friend. They would live, I would make certain of that. They would laugh and inspire ballads and collect favors until the end of time. This was for them. And for my knight, who had given everything for me. Who would've been there to the very end, had I let him.

Ash, Puck, everyone. I love you all. Remember me. And in one final, determined push, I gathered the power of the Iron King into a massive, swirling ball and sent it deep into the roots of the giant oak.

A shudder went through the tree, continuing into the land around it, like ripples on a glassy pond. It radiated outward, spreading to the dead trees and vegetation, and the once-withered plants stirred as the new glamour touched their roots. I sensed the land waking up, drinking in the new magic, healing the poison that the Iron glamour had seeped into the land. Trees straightened, unfurling new leaves from steel branches. The hard obsidian plain shuddered as green sprouts pushed their way to the surface. The mottled yellow clouds began to break apart, showing blue sky and sun peeking through the cracks.

A cool breeze blew in from somewhere, cooling my face and causing a rain of leaves to flutter around me. The air smelled of earth and new grass. Lulled into a deep peace, listening to the sounds of growing things all around me, I closed my eyes and finally surrendered to the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
THE IRON QUEEN

Machina waited for me on the other side.

"Hello, Meghan Chase," he greeted softly, smiling in the brightness that surrounded us. No longer the black void of dreams, or the harsh whiteness of my mind, I didn't really know where I was. Coiling mist surrounded me, and I wondered if this was just one more test before I reached the afterlife, or whatever lay beyond the fog.

"Machina." I nodded. He was barely discernible in the mist, but every so often the fog would clear and I saw him, though sometimes he appeared as a massive tree. "What are you doing here?" I sighed. "Don't tell me you're guarding the pearly gates. You never struck me as the angelic type."

The Iron King shook his head. His cables, folded behind him, looked almost like glimmering wings, but Machina could not, in any way, be mistaken for something else. I blinked, and for a moment it seemed I stood under the limbs of the great oak again. But the land around it was changed, green and silver, twined together seamlessly. I turned my head and Machina stood before me again, gazing down with what could only be pride.

"I wanted to congratulate you," he murmured, like the whisper of wind through the leaves. "You've come farther than anyone could have expected. Defeating the false king by sacrificing yourself was phenomenal. But then, you gave your power to the one thing that could save you both—the land itself."

Movement swirled around me, flashes of color, showing a land both familiar and strange. Mountains of junk dominated the landscape, but moss and vines grew around them now, twisted and blooming with flowers. A huge city of stone and steel had both street lamps and flowering trees lining the streets, and a fountain in the center square spouted clear water. A railroad cut through a grassy plain, where a huge silver oak loomed over crumbling ruins, shiny and metallic and alive.

"Summer and Iron," Machina continued softly, "merged together, becoming one. You've done the impossible, Meghan Chase. The

corruption of the Nevernever has been cleansed. The Iron fey now have a place to live without fearing the wrath of the other courts." He sighed and shook his head. "If Mab and Oberon can leave us in peace, that is."

"What about the regular fey?" I asked, as the images faded and it was just me and the Iron King once more. "Can't they live here, as well?"

"No." Machina faced me solemnly. "Though you have cleansed the poison and stopped the spread of Iron glamour, our world is still just as deadly to the oldbloods. Iron fey are still everything the regular fey fear and dread; we cannot survive in the same place. The most we can hope for is peaceful coexistence in our separate realms. And even that might be too much for the other rulers of the fey courts. Summer and Winter are mired in their traditions. They need someone to show them another way."

I fell silent, considering this. What Machina said made sense, but he didn't say how he would accomplish this. Who would step up and be the champion of the Iron fey, the new Iron King?

Of course. I sighed, shaking my head. "You'd think, after saving the entire realm of Faery, I could get some sort of vacation," I muttered, daunted by the huge task before me. "Why does it have to be me? Can't someone else do it?"

"When you gave away your power, you essentially healed the land," Machina said, regarding me with a small smile. "And, because you are connected, the land healed you in return. You, Meghan Chase, are the living, beating heart of the Iron Realm. Its glamour sustains you; your existence gives it life. You cannot survive without each other." He started to fade, the brightness around us growing dimmer, becoming a black void. "So," murmured the last Iron King, his voice barely a whisper in the dark, "the only question is, what are you going to do now?"

* * *

SOMETHING TOUCHED MY FACE, and I opened my eyes.

A small, anxious face stared into mine, eyes glowing green, huge ears fanning away from its head. Razor squawked as I blinked at him, then grinned in delight.

"Master!"

I groaned and waved him off. My body felt weak, pounded on and beaten into submission, but thankfully, there wasn't any lingering pain.

Above me, the metal branches of the great oak waved gently in the wind, sunlight slanting through the leaves and dappling the ground. My fingers brushed cool grass as I carefully eased myself into a sitting position, gazing around in astonishment.

I was surrounded by Iron fey. Gremlins and Iron knights, hacker elves and clockwork hounds, wiremen, dwarves, spider-hags, and more. Glitch stood silently with his arm in a sling, next to Spikerail and two of his iron horses, watching me with solemn eyes.

I could feel them, all of them. I could feel every heartbeat, sense the Iron glamour coursing through them, pulsing in time with the land, flowing through me. I knew the edges of my realm, brushing against the Nevernever, not spreading, not corrupting, content to sit within its new boundaries. I felt every tree and bush and blade of grass, spread before me like a seamless patchwork quilt. And, if I closed my eyes and really concentrated, I could hear my own heartbeat, and the pulse of the land, echoing it.

What will you do now, Meghan Chase?

I understood. This was my fate, my destiny. I knew what had to be done. Pulling myself upright, I took a step forward, away from the trunk, standing on my own. As one, every Iron fey, rank upon rank of them, bowed their heads and sank to their knees. Even Glitch, bending down awkwardly, holding on to a kneeling Spikerail for support. Even Razor and the gremlins, burying their faces in the grass. The Iron knights clanked in unison as they drew their swords and knelt, the sword points jammed into the earth.

In the silence, I gazed out over the mass of kneeling fey and raised my voice. I don’t know why I said it, but deep down, I knew it was right. My words echoed over the crowd, sealing my fate. It would be a hard road, and I had a lot of work ahead of me, but in the end, this was the only possible outcome.

“My name is Meghan Chase, and I am the Iron Queen.”

EPILOGUE

MIDNIGHT AT 14202 CEDAR DRIVE, LOUISIANA

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Glitch asked me, his spines glowing electric-blue in the darkness. We stood at the edge of the trees, looking out over an overgrown front yard and gravel driveway, a battered Ford at the top.

I nodded wearily. The night was warm, humid, and no breeze stirred the branches of the tupelo trees around us. I wore jeans and a white top and it felt strange, being back in normal clothes. “They deserve to know the truth. I owe them that much. They need to understand why I can’t come home.”

“You can visit,” Glitch said encouragingly. “No one’s going to stop you. No reason you can’t go back from time to time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed softly, but I wasn’t convinced. Time flowed differently in Faery, in the Iron Kingdom I now found myself ruling over. The first few days had been hectic, as I frantically did everything I could to keep Mab and Oberon from declaring another war on the Iron fey, now that Ferrum was gone. Several meetings had been called, new treaties drawn up and signed, and strict rules had been placed on the boundaries between our kingdoms, before the rulers of Summer and Winter were appeased. I had the sneaking suspicion that Oberon was slightly more lenient because we were related, and I had no problem with that.

Puck had been at these meetings, gregarious and unchangeable as always. He made it clear that he would not be treating me any differently just because I was a queen now, and proved it by kissing me on the cheek in front of a squad of angry Iron knights, whom I had to yell at to stand down before they tried skewering him. Puck had flounced off, laughing. Around me, he was cheerful and flippant, but overly so, as if he wasn’t quite sure who I was anymore. There was a wariness to him now, an uncertainty that went beyond our easy friendship, making us awkward and uncomfortable with each other. Perhaps it was his very nature, as the incorrigible Robin Goodfellow, to defy kings and queens and make a mockery of those in authority. I didn’t know. Eventually, Puck would come around, but I had a feeling it would be some time before I got my old best friend back.

I did not see Ash, ever.

I shook myself, trying to put him from my mind as I had done these past few days. Ash was gone. I'd made sure of that. Even if I hadn't used his True Name, there was no way he could venture into the Iron Kingdom, no way he could survive there. It was better this way.

Now, if I could only convince my heart of that.

"Sure you'll be all right?" Glitch asked, breaking through my thoughts. "I could come with you, if you'd like. They won't even see me."

I shook my head. "Better if I do this alone. Besides, there's one member of that household who *can* see you. And he's seen enough scary monsters to last him a lifetime."

"Begging your pardon, your highness," Glitch smirked, "but who are you calling a scary monster?"

I swatted at him. My first lieutenant grinned, a constant shadow since the day I'd taken over the Iron Kingdom. The Iron fey looked up to him, listened to him, when I couldn't be there. The Iron knights had accepted his position easily, almost relieved to be back under his command, and I didn't question it. "I'll be back before dawn," I said, glancing up at the moon through the trees. "I trust you can handle things until then?"

"Yes, your majesty," Glitch replied, no longer smirking, and I winced, still getting used to the idea of being called "your majesty," by everyone. "Princess" had been bad enough. "Mag Tuiredh will be safe and secure until your return. And your…father…will be well looked after, do not worry."

I nodded, thankful that Glitch understood. After I became queen and set Mag Tuiredh as the site of the new Iron Court, I kept the promise to myself and returned to Leanansidhe's cabin for Paul. My human father was almost recovered, clear-minded most of the time, his memories fully intact. He knew me, and he remembered what had happened to him, all those years ago. And now that his mind was finally his own, he was going to do everything in his power to keep it that way. I made it clear that he was free to leave the faery world at any time, that I wasn't about to keep him here if he wanted to go. For the moment, Paul refused. He wasn't ready to brave the human world, not yet. Too much had changed in the time he'd been away, too much had happened, and he'd been left behind. One day he might rejoin the real world, but for now, he wanted to know his daughter again.

He'd refused to come with me tonight. "Tonight is for you," he'd told me before I left. "You don't need any distractions. One day, I'd like your mother to know what happened, but I hope to explain it myself. If she even wants to see me again." He sighed, looking out the window of his room. The sun was setting behind the distant clock tower, casting his face in a reddish light. "Just tell me this. Is she happy?"

I hesitated, a lump forming in my throat. "I think so."

Paul nodded, smiling sadly. "Then she doesn't need to know about me. Not yet, anyway. Or not ever. No, you go and see your family again. I really don't have any business being there."

"Majesty?" Glitch's voice interrupted my musings. He'd been doing that a lot lately, bringing me back to the present when I drifted off. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." I faced the dark house again, pushing my hair back. "Well, here I go. Wish me luck." And before I lost my nerve, I stepped onto the gravel driveway and forced my steps in the direction of the house.

For as long as I could remember, the middle step of the porch had creaked when trod upon, no matter where you put your foot or how lightly you stepped on it. It didn't creak now, not even a squeak, as I glided up the steps and came to a halt at the screen door. The windows were dark, and moths fluttered around the porch light, flicking shadows over the faded wooden steps.

I could have easily opened the locked door. Doors and locks were no barrier to me now. A few whispered words, a push of glamour, and the door would swing open on its own. I could've entered the living room unhindered, invisible as the breeze.

I didn't glamour the door. Tonight, at least for a little while, I wanted to be human. Raising my fist, I knocked loudly on the faded wood.

There was no response at first. The house remained still and dark. A dog barked, somewhere in the night.

A light flicked on inside, footsteps thumping over the floor. A silhouette against the curtains, and then Luke's face appeared in the window, peering out suspiciously.

At first, my stepfather didn't appear to see me, though I was staring right at him. His brow furrowed and he dropped the curtains, stepping back. I blew out a sigh and pounded the door again.

It swung open this time, quickly, as if whoever was on the other side expected to catch the prankster banging on his door at 12 a.m.

Luke peered at me. He looked older, I thought, his brown eyes wearier than before, his face grizzled. He regarded me with a puzzled look, one hand still on the doorknob. “Yes?” he prompted when I didn’t say anything. “Can I help you?”

He still didn’t recognize me. I wasn’t surprised, or even angry really. I wasn’t the same girl who vanished into Faery a year ago. But before I could say anything, the door was yanked open all the way, and Mom appeared in the frame.

We stared at each other. My heart pounded, half-fearful that Mom would turn that blank, puzzled gaze on me, not recognizing the strange girl on the porch. But a second later, Mom let out a small cry and flew through the door.

Another moment and I was in her arms, hugging her tightly as she sobbed and laughed and asked me a thousand questions all at once. I closed my eyes and let this moment swirl around me, holding on to it for as long as I could. I wanted to remember, for just a few heartbeats, what it was like to be, not a faery or a pawn or a queen, but just a daughter.

“Meggie?” I pulled back a bit and, through the open door, I saw Ethan standing at the foot of the stairs. Taller now, older. He must’ve grown at least three inches while I was gone. But his eyes were the same: bright blue and as solemn as the grave.

He didn’t run to me as I entered the living room, didn’t smile. Calmly, as if he knew I’d be back all along, he walked across the floor until he was standing a foot away. I knelt, and he watched me, holding my gaze with an expression far too old for his face.

“I knew you’d come back.” His voice was different, too. Clearer now, more sure of himself. My half brother was no longer a toddler. “I didn’t forget.”

“No,” I whispered. “You didn’t forget.”

I opened my arms, and he finally stepped into them, fisting his hands in my hair. I hugged him to me as I stood, wondering if this was the last time I would hold him like this. He might be a teenager when I saw him next.

“Meghan.” Mom’s voice made me turn. She stood at the edge of the living room with Luke behind her, watching me with a strange, sad

expression. As if she'd just figured something out. "You're…not staying, are you?"

I closed my eyes, feeling Ethan's arms around my neck squeeze tight. "No," I told her, shaking my head. "I can't. I have…responsibilities now, people who need me. I just wanted to say goodbye and…" My breath hitched, and I swallowed hard to clear my throat. "And try to explain what happened to me the night I went back." I sighed and cast a glance at Luke, still standing by the door in confusion, his brow furrowed as he looked from me to Mom and back again. "I don't know if you'll believe me," I continued, "but you should hear the truth. Before…before I have to leave."

Mom walked across the floor as if sleepwalking, sinking on the couch in a daze. But her eyes were clear and determined when she looked at me and patted the cushion beside her. "Tell me everything," was all she said.

* * *

And so I did.

Starting from the very beginning. The day I walked into Faery to get Ethan back. I told them about the faery courts, about Oberon and Mab and Puck. I told them about Machina and the Iron fey, about Glitch and the rebels and the false king. I glossed over a few small, terrifying details, parts of the story where I almost died, or that were too scary for Ethan to hear. I left out the parts with Paul, knowing it wasn't my place to tell his story. By the time I reached the end, where I defeated Ferrum and became the Iron Queen, Ethan was asleep on my lap, and Luke's eyes were glazed over in utter disbelief. I knew he wouldn't remember much of the story, if any, that it would slip and fade from his mind, becoming something he heard in a fairy tale.

Mom was silent for several heartbeats when I finished. "So, you're…a queen now." She said the words like she was testing them, seeing how they felt. "A…faery queen."

"Yes."

"And…there's no way for you to stay in the real world. With us. With your family."

I shook my head. "The land is calling me. I'm tied to it now. I have to go back."

Mom bit her lip, and her eyes finally filled with tears. I was surprised when Luke spoke, his deep, calm voice echoing through the room. “Will we see you again?”

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “Maybe.”

“Will you be all right?” Luke continued. “Alone with these…things?” As if speaking the word *faery* would make it more real, and he wasn’t about to start believing yet.

“I’ll be fine.” I thought of Paul and wished he could be here tonight. “I won’t be alone.”

The sky through the windows was lightening. We had talked through the night, and dawn was on its way.

Gently, I kissed Ethan’s forehead and eased him onto the couch without waking him, then stood to face Mom and Luke. “I have to go,” I said softly. “They’re waiting for me.”

Mom hugged me again, and Luke enfolded us both in his thick arms. “Be sure to write,” Mom sniffed, as if I was going on a long trip, or away to college. Maybe it was easier for her to think that. “Call us if you have the chance, and try to come home for holidays.”

“I’ll try,” I murmured, stepping away. For a moment, I gazed around the farmhouse, reliving old memories, letting them warm me inside and out. No longer home, but it was a part of me that would always be there, a place that would never fade away. I turned to Mom and Luke and smiled through the tears I hadn’t realized were falling until now.

“Meghan.” Mom stepped forward, pleading. “Are you sure you have to do this? Can’t you stay, just a few days?”

I shook my head. “I love you, Mom.” Drawing on my glamour, I swirled it around me like a cloak. “Tell Ethan I won’t forget.”

“Meghan!”

“Goodbye,” I whispered, and faded from sight. Both Mom and Luke jumped, looking around frantically, then Mom buried her face in Luke’s shoulder and sobbed.

Ethan woke up, blinked at his parents, then looked right at me, still invisible by the front door. His eyebrows rose, and I put my finger to my lips, praying he wouldn’t cause a fuss.

Ethan smiled. One small hand rose in a brief wave, then he hopped off the couch and padded up to Mom, still being consoled by Luke. I watched my family, felt their love and grief and support, and smiled proudly.

You'll be fine, I told them, swallowing the lump in my throat. *You'll be fine without me.*

Blinking back tears, I gave my family one last look and swept through the front door into the waiting dawn.

* * *

I WAS HALFWAY ACROSS the front lawn, forcing myself to put one foot in front of the other and not turn back, when a bark caught my attention, and I looked up.

Something was bounding toward me over the grass, a shadow in the predawn light. Something large and furry and vaguely familiar. A wolf? No, a dog! A big, shaggy…no, that couldn't be right…

"Beau?" I gasped, as the huge German shepherd slammed into me with the force of a freight train, nearly knocking me down. It *was* Beau. I laughed as his big paws muddied my shirt and his enormous tongue slapped the side of my face.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, rubbing his neck as he panted and wagged his whole body in joy. I hadn't seen our old farm dog since the day Luke had unjustly taken him to the pound, thinking he'd bitten Ethan. "Did Mom decide to bring you home? How—"

I stopped, my fingers brushing something thin and metallic looped around his neck, under his shaggy fur. Wondering if it was a collar with tags, I calmed Beau long enough to pull it free, drawing it over his ears and holding it up for a closer look.

It was a familiar silver chain, on which hung the remains of a shattered amulet, glinting in the predawn light.

My heart skipped a beat. With Beau still dancing at my feet, I looked around, scanning the front yard and the edge of the trees. He couldn't be here. I'd sent him away, released him from his vows. He should hate me.

And yet…here it was.

For a few heart-pounding moments, I waited. Waited for his dark form to slip out of the shadows, for those bright silver eyes to find me. I thought I could feel him nearby, watching. I could almost imagine I sensed his heartbeat, felt his emotions—or maybe that was my own longing. My own sense of loss and grief and regret, and the love I knew could never be.

A weight pressed against my chest, and I smiled sadly. Deep down, I knew he wasn't coming. We were from different worlds, now. Ash couldn't survive in the Iron Realm, and I could not—would not—abandon it. I had responsibilities, to the Iron Realm, to my subjects, to myself. Ash couldn't be a part of that. Better a clean break than to drag it out, wishing for the impossible. He knew that. This was just his final gift; his last farewell.

Still, I hesitated, my stomach in knots, hoping against hope that he would find me, change his mind, and come back. But several silent minutes passed, and Ash did not appear. Finally, as the last of the stars faded from the heavens, I put the chain in my pocket and knelt to scratch Beau behind the ears.

"He's something, isn't he?" I asked the dog, who blinked and thumped his tail solemnly. "I don't know where he found you, or how he brought you here, but I'm glad he did. I wish I could see him one more time…" A lump rose to my throat, and I swallowed it down. "You'll like it in your new home, boy," I went on, trying to be cheerful. "Plenty of room, lots of gremlins to chase, and I think you'll really like Paul." The dog whined, cocking his head. I kissed his long muzzle and stood. "Come on," I said, wiping my eyes, "I'll introduce you."

The sky was now a soft pink. Birds twittered in the branches around me, and a faint wind rustled the leaves. Everywhere, life was stirring, moving on. I took a deep breath and looked to the sky, letting the breeze dry my tears. Ash was gone, but I still had people who needed me, who were waiting for me. I could wallow in my loss, or I could trust my knight and move on. I could wait. Time was on my side, after all. In the meantime, I had a kingdom to run.

"Majesty!"

Glitch's voice shattered the calm of the morning, and my first lieutenant came striding through the trees. Beau growled, flattening his ears, until I touched his neck and he calmed down.

"All you all right?" Glitch asked anxiously, violet eyes wide as he stared at Beau. "What is that…thing? It looks dangerous. Did it hurt you?"

"Beau, this is Glitch," I introduced, and the dog gave a tentative tail wag. "Glitch, this is Beau. Be nice, the both of you. You'll be seeing a lot of each other, I expect."

"Wait. It's coming with us?"

I laughed at his horrified expression. Beau barked happily and wagged his tail, leaning close. I slipped my arm through Glitch's and smiled at the dog pressed against my leg. Life wasn't perfect, but it was as perfect as it could be at the moment. I had a place in the world. I wasn't alone.

"Come on," I told them. "They'll be waiting for us, back at the city. Let's go home."

* * *

Ash

He watched her from the fading dark, unseen and invisible, just another shadow in the trees. He wondered if he had been right to come here, to see her one last time, though he knew resisting her was futile. He couldn't leave without seeing her again, hearing her voice and seeing her smile, even though it wasn't for him. He had no illusions about his addiction to her. She had her fingers sunk firmly into his heart, and could do with it what she wished.

He watched her walk away with the Iron faery and the dog, watched them leave to return to her own realm, back to a place he couldn't follow.

For now.

"So." Robin Goodfellow appeared beside him, arms crossed over his chest, also watching the girl and her companions depart. "She's gone."

"Yes."

Goodfellow shot him a sideways glance, wary and expectant. "What now?"

He sighed, raked a hand through his hair. "I have something to do," he murmured. "A promise to keep. I might not be back for a long time."

"Huh." Goodfellow scratched his head, and grinned. "Sounds like fun. Where are we going?"

Now it was his turn to eye the other fey. "I don't recall inviting you."

"Too bad, ice-boy." Infuriating as always, Goodfellow leaned back and smirked at him. "I've had enough of war and killing for a while. Tormenting you is so much more fun. Besides…" Goodfellow sighed and looked back to the now-empty steps. "I want her to be happy, and she's most happy with you. Maybe this will make up for…past mistakes." He

shook his head and returned to his normal idiocy. “So, either you say, ‘sure, I’d love to have you along,’ or you have a big bird dropping things on your head the whole trip.”

He sighed, defeated. Perhaps it was best for Goodfellow to trail along. He was a competent fighter after all. And they had been…friends…once. Though this journey would change nothing. “Fine,” he muttered. “Just stay out of my way.”

The Summer faery grinned, rubbing his hands together, looking gleeful. He felt a brief moment of trepidation, inviting Puck along. Most likely, they would try to kill each other before the trip was through. “So, where are we going?” Goodfellow asked. “I assume you have some sort of plan for this adventure.”

An adventure. He didn’t think of it that way, but it didn’t matter. *I don’t care what it’s called. I just want to be with her at the end. I’m not giving up. Meghan, I’ll be with you soon. Please, wait for me.*

“Hey, ice-boy. Did you hear me? Where are we going? What are we doing?”

“I heard you,” he murmured, and turned away, beginning to walk into the trees. “And yes, I have a plan.”

“Really. Do enlighten me.”

“First, we’re going to find a certain cat.”

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It occurred to me, as I sat down to write this page, that I have come to the end of book three. Book *three,* and a few years back, I didn't even know if I would publish a single novel. Of course, I couldn't get here without the help of many awesome, wonderful people. Without them, I never could've written *The End* on the final page of the final chapter. I have so many people to be grateful for.

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without him.

SUMMER'S CROSSING

Julie Kagawa

A Midsummer's Nightmare?

Robin Goodfellow. Puck. Summer Court prankster, King Oberon's right hand, bane of many a faery queen's existence—and secret friend to Prince Ash of the Winter Court. Until one girl's death came between them, and another girl stole both their hearts.

Now Ash has granted one favor too many and someone's come to collect, forcing the prince to a place he cannot go without Puck's help—into the heart of the Summer Court. And Puck faces the ultimate choice—betray Ash and possibly win the girl they both love, or help his former friend turned bitter enemy pull off a deception that no true faery prankster could possibly resist.

An ebook exclusive novella from Julie Kagawa's Iron Fey series.

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Chapter One
And as I am an Honest Puck

Names.

What's in a name, really? I mean, besides a bunch of letters or sounds strung together to make a word. Does a rose by any other name really smell as sweet? Would the most famous love story in the world be as poignant if it was called *Romeo and Gertrude*? Why is what we call ourselves so important?

Heh, sorry, I don't usually get philosophical. I've just been wondering lately. Names are, of course, very important to my kind. Me, I have so many, I can't even remember them all. None of them are my True Name, of course. No one has ever spoken my real name out loud, not once, despite all the titles and nicknames and myths I've collected for myself over the years. No one has ever come close to getting it right.

Curious, are you? Wanna know my True Name? Okay, listen up, I've never told anyone before. My True Name is…

Hahahaha! You really thought I would tell you? Really? Oh, I kill me. But, like I said, names are important to us. For one thing, they tie us to this world; they ground us in reality somewhat. If you know your True Name—not everyone in our world finds it—you're more "real" than if you don't know who you are. And for a race that has a tendency to fade away if we're forgotten, that's kind of a big deal.

My name, one of many, is Robin Goodfellow.

You may have heard of me.

* * *

Once upon a time, I had two close friends. Shocking, I know, given my natural charm, but there are those who just don't appreciate my brilliance. We weren't supposed to be friends, the three of us, or even friendly with each other. I was part of the Seelie Court, and they…weren't. But I'd never been one for following the rules, and who knew Queen Mab's youngest son

could be such a rebel as well? And Ariella… I'd known Ash a long time before Ariella came into the picture, but I never begrudged her presence. She was the buffer between us; the one who could calm Ash when he slipped too far toward his ruthless Unseelie nature, or advised caution when one of my plans seemed a little…impulsive. Once upon a time, we were inseparable.

Once upon a time, I did something stupid. And lost them both in the process.

Which brings us to…now. Today. Where, once more, it was me and my former best friend, getting ready to head off on another adventure. Just like old times.

Except, he still hadn't forgiven me for what had happened all those years ago. And he hadn't really invited me along, either. I sort of…invited myself.

But if I made a habit of waiting for an invitation, I'd never get to go anywhere.

"So," I said brightly, falling into step behind the brooding prince. "Grimalkin. We're going to find him, right?"

"Yes."

"Any idea where he is?"

"No."

"Any idea where to start looking?"

"No."

"You do realize that doesn't constitute much of a plan, right ice-boy?"

He turned to glare at me, which I considered a small triumph. Ash usually ignored my goading. Anytime I could poke through his icy indifference was a victory. Of course, when poking the Winter prince, one had to proceed with caution. There was a fine line between irritation and having icicles hurled at your face.

He glared at me a moment longer, then sighed, raking a hand through his hair—a sure sign that he was frustrated. "Do you have any suggestions, Goodfellow?" he muttered, sounding reluctant to even ask. And for just a moment, I saw how lost he was, how uncertain of the future and what lay ahead. Anyone else wouldn't have seen it, but I knew Ash. I could always catch those tiny flashes of emotion, no matter how well he hid them. It almost made me feel sorry for him.

Almost.

I grinned disarmingly. “What? Are you actually asking for my opinion, ice-boy?” I taunted, and that doubt vanished, replaced by annoyance. “Well,” I went on, leaning back against a tree trunk, “since you asked, we might want to check if anyone around here owes him a favor.”

“That narrows things down,” Ash said sarcastically. I rolled my eyes, but he did have a point. If we started naming everyone that might owe our feline friend a favor, the list would fill several books.

“Well, then.” I crossed my arms. “If you have a better suggestion, Prince, I’d love to hear it.”

Before he could answer, a ripple of glamour shivered through the air. Glitter and streamers of light swirled around us, and a chorus of tiny voices sang out a single note. I winced, knowing there was only one person who thought a normal entrance, like walking through a door, wasn’t good enough for her; she had to announce her presence with sparkle and glitter and St. Peter’s choir.

“Darlings!”

Sometimes, it sucks being right all the time.

“Leanansidhe,” Ash grumbled, sounding about as thrilled as I felt as the Queen of the Exiles stepped out of the glitter and light and smiled down at us. She looked like she was going to a party where the theme was Most Sparkly Evening Gown, or maybe Quickest Way to Blind Someone. She paused a moment, striking a dramatic pose for her sadly unimpressed audience, before waving her hand and dispersing with the fireworks.

“Lea,” I echoed, smirking at her. “This is a shock. To what do we owe the pleasure of your company, away from the Between and all?”

“Puck, darling.” Leanansidhe gave me a smile that was about as welcoming as a viper eyeing a mouse. “Why am I not surprised to see you here? It seems I just got rid of you, pet, and here you are again.”

“That’s me.” I raised my chin. “The bad penny that always pops up. But you didn’t answer my question. What do you want, Lea?”

“From you? Nothing, darling.” Leanansidhe turned to Ash, and he stiffened. “Ash, darling,” she purred. “You *are* a trooper, aren’t you, pet? I was certain, after you made your knightly oath, that you and the girl would go all Romeo and Juliet on me. But you survived the final battle after all. Bravo, pet, bravo.”

I snorted. “So what am I, chopped liver?”

Leanansidhe shot me an annoyed glance. “No, darling,” she sighed. “But the Winter prince and I have unfinished business, or didn’t he tell you?” She smiled and looked at Ash again. “He owes me a favor—a rather large favor—for helping him out, and I have come to collect.”

A bargain with the Exile Queen? For a second, I wasn’t sure I’d heard right. “Ice-boy.” I shook my head, exasperated. “Really? You made a deal with *her*? Are you crazy? You, of all people, should know better.”

“It was for Meghan.” Ash’s voice was low, defensive. “I needed her help.” He looked at Leanansidhe, quietly pleading. “Can this not wait?” he asked in a calm voice, and the question surprised me. Ash rarely made deals, but when he did, he was religious about upholding them. It was a point of personal honor, I guessed, to keep his bargains without fail, without complaint, even if he’d managed to get the bad end of one. This was the very first time I’d heard him ask for more time, the first I’d heard him plead for anything.

But he’d find no sympathy with the Exile Queen. I could’ve told him that. “No, darling,” Leanansidhe said briskly. “I’m afraid it cannot. I know you and Goodfellow are about to go tromping off after Grimalkin, and that, I fear, might take a long time. A very long time. Time I do not have. I am calling in this debt *now*, and you will help me *now*. Besides, darling.” Leanansidhe sniffed, making a dramatic gesture with a gloved hand. “After you are done with this, I might be able to help. Finding Grimalkin if he does not wish to be found is a near impossible task. I could, at least, point you in the right direction.”

Ash sighed, looking impatient, but there was nothing he could do. Even I couldn’t wiggle my way out of a contract, though if I had to strike a deal, I always left myself *some* kind of loophole. You’d get screwed eight ways from Sunday, otherwise. In the courts, the nobles all loved this game, each one trying to pull a fast one on the other, though most of them knew better than to make a deal with me anymore. Especially after the fiasco with Titania and the donkey ears. Being a legend does have its advantages sometimes.

Ash knew his way around the fey courts, too; he’d grown up having to watch his back. I was surprised he’d allowed himself to strike a bargain with Leanansidhe; he should’ve known it would come back to bite him.

As if he sensed what I was thinking, Ash glared at me, proud and defiant, daring me to say something. He did know, I realized. Mr. Cold,

Dark and Broody might be a lot of things, but he wasn't stupid. He knew Faery always came to collect, he knew the dangers of bargaining with a dangerous, exiled faery queen. But he'd done it anyway, because of her. Because of the girl we were both crazy for, who was now far away, beyond our reach.

Meghan.

"Fine." Ash faced the Exile Queen again. "Let's get this over with. What do you need, Leanansidhe?"

Leanansidhe preened. "Just a small request, darling," she smiled. "A teensy favor, hardly worth mentioning. You'll be done in no time."

Which was Faery speak for "huge, ginormous, dangerous ordeal." I frowned, but Leanansidhe continued without looking in my direction.

"I'm afraid I've lost something," she continued with a heartfelt sigh. "Something I prize most dearly. Something that cannot be replaced. I would like you to get it back."

"Lost?" I broke in. "Lost how? Lost like you dropped it down the sink, or lost like it walked out the door and ran off into the woods?"

Leanansidhe pursed her lips and shot me a glance. "Puck, darling, I don't mean to sound rude, but why are you still here? I made a bargain with the Winter prince, and it does not involve you in any way. Shouldn't you be off annoying Oberon or his basilisk of a wife?"

"Ouch." I mock grimaced. "Well, it's nice to feel so wanted." The Exile Queen narrowed her eyes, looking a bit more dangerous, and I grinned back. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Lea, but I was here first. If ice-boy wants me to leave, he can say so. Otherwise, I'm not going anywhere."

I wasn't anyway, and they both knew it, but Leanansidhe looked at Ash. When he didn't say anything, she huffed. "You both are impossible," she stated, throwing up her hands. "Oh, very well. Stay or go, darling, it makes no difference to me. In fact…" She stopped then, mid-gesture, regarding me with a faint smile that made me nervous. "Now that I think of it, this might be for the best. Yes, of course. This will work out nicely."

Ash and I exchanged a glance. "Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like what's coming next?" I muttered. He shook his head, and I sighed. "Okay, enough dancing around. For the ten million dollar question—what exactly did you lose, Lea?"

"A violin," Leanansidhe exclaimed, as if that were obvious. "It is most upsetting, and I have been a broken wreck because of it." She sniffed,

clutching at her heart. “My favorite violin, stolen right out from under me.”

“A violin?” I echoed, making a face. “Really? You’re calling in a favor for that? What, you don’t want to wait until you’ve lost a pipe organ or something?”

Ash regarded her solemnly. “You want us to find the thief,” he said, and it wasn’t really a question.

“Well, not really, darling.” Leanansidhe scratched the side of her face. “I have a good idea who the thief is, and where they took my precious violin. I simply need you to go there and bring it back.”

“If you know who the thief is, and where they took the violin, why do you need us?”

Leanansidhe smiled at me. It was a very evil smile, I thought. “Because, my darling Puck,” she crooned, “my precious violin was stolen by Titania, your Summer Queen. I need you and the Winter prince to go into the Seelie Court and steal it back.”

* * *

Oh, fabulous.

“Well,” I said cheerfully, “is that all? Steal something back from the Queen of the Seelie Court? I was just thinking we needed to go on a suicide mission, right ice-boy?”

Ash ignored me, typical of him. “*Queen Titania* has your violin?” he asked, incredulous. “Are you certain it was her?”

“Quite certain, darling.” Leanansidhe pulled a cigarette flute out of the air, puffing indignantly. “In fact, this was right after you went back into the Nevernever. The jealous shrew made quite sure I knew who was responsible. She *still* believes I stole her wretched golden mirror, all those years ago, and has never forgiven me for it.” Lea paused then, and looked right at me. “I do not know how she has come to think that, pet, do you?”

I blinked innocently. “Why are you looking at me, Lea?” I asked, batting my eyelashes. “Is this the face of such a dastardly villain?” Leanansidhe sighed.

“Anyway,” she continued, turning back to Ash, “that is the situation. And as I cannot go into the courts any longer, I need someone who can. That’s where you two come in.”

“I cannot just walk into Arcadia,” Ash said. “I will be trespassing, and by law the Summer King may have me executed if we are discovered. You know this.”

“I know, darling,” Lea placated. “But I suspect you’ll be able to come up with something. Especially if you have Master Goodfellow with you.” She smiled and puffed a smoke rabbit at me. “Unless, of course, he is not up to the challenge. Unless he’s *afraid* of his terrible Summer Queen.”

“Oh, please. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” I told her, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not dumb enough to fall for that, Lea. Who do you think you’re talking to, anyway?”

“I would think this is right up your alley, darling,” the Exile Queen returned. “Sneak the Winter prince into Arcadia, right under Titania’s nose? Steal something from the bitch queen’s room, only to hand it over to her rival? It has ‘Robin Goodfellow’ written all over it.”

Yeah, it did, didn’t it? This sounded exactly like one of my pranks, and truthfully, under other circumstances, I’d be more than eager. Titania wasn’t fond of me, and the feeling was mutual. Any chance I got to annoy, irritate, or piss off the Summer Queen, I’d jump at the opportunity. It wasn’t that I *hated* her, she was my queen after all, but she really needed to lighten up. Besides, I’d heard about what she did to Meghan the first time they met, and that needed a little payback. No one turns *my* Summer princess into a deer and gets away with it, even if it is the Seelie Queen. Even if Meghan would never know that I’d defended her.

Right now, however, I understood Ash’s impatience. The vow he made to Meghan, his promise to return to her, didn’t really have an expiration date, but I figured it would be a long, arduous adventure without all these annoying side quests. We needed to be searching for a certain obnoxious furball, not pranking the Seelie Queen, no matter how entertaining that sounded.

Except, Lea really wasn’t giving us a choice.

“So, if you two could get right on that—” she smiled, waving her cigarette flute at us “—I’d be ever so grateful. When you have the violin, just meet me back here, darlings. I’ll have my spies monitor your progress. But now, you must excuse me. I’m afraid I left Razor Dan in charge of security while I was gone, and I must return quickly before he or his motley eats someone. Good luck, pets! Don’t get yourselves turned into a rosebush!”

Another swirl of glitter and lights, and the Exile Queen was gone.

Ash sighed. “Don’t say anything, Goodfellow.”

“What? Me?” I grinned at him. “Say something? I’m not the type who would point out that, for once, this absurd situation isn’t *my* fault. Of course, *I* know better than to make deals with crazy Exile Queens with goddess complexes. And if I did, I would *expect* them to call in the favor at the worst possible time. But I’m certainly not one to rub it in. That would just be wrong.”

Ash pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m beginning to regret inviting you.”

“You wound me deeply, Prince.” I laced my hands behind my head, enjoying myself. “Especially since you’re gonna need my help to get into Summer. Don’t think Oberon and Titania won’t notice a Winter prince strolling right into the heart of Arcadia. You’d stick out like an ogre in a china shop.”

He scowled, whether from the seemingly impossible task of sneaking into Arcadia or because I just compared him to an ogre, I didn’t know. “I assume you have a plan?” he muttered, crossing his arms.

I shot him an evil grin and was rewarded by his brief look of trepidation. “Please. Did you forget who you’re talking to, ice-boy? Just leave everything to me.”

Chapter Two
For Oberon Is Passing Fell and Wrath

It was twilight when we crossed the barrier from the mortal realm into the wyldwood. Then again, it was always twilight beneath the wyldwood's huge canopy. Sunlight couldn't penetrate the thick branches of the trees rising hundreds of yards into the air. Unlike the vivid brightness of Summer and the frigid harshness Winter, the wyldwood was eternally dark, tangled, and dangerous. It was constantly changing, so you never knew what you'd run into next.

I loved it. Even though I was Summer, this felt more like home than anywhere else.

"Here we are," I said, stepping beneath a pair of cypresses twisted together to form an arch between the trunks. Around us, the murk of the wyldwood closed in, though a few lone will-o-the-wisps bobbed through the leaves, looking for lost travelers. Thick black briars crawled between trunks, creeping along the ground as they strangled the life from all other vegetation. "Arcadia isn't far. I would've used the trod that takes us through the quartz caverns, but I'm afraid a lindworm has taken up residence since the last time I was there."

Ash looked around, always alert, and raised an eyebrow. "You do realize you've brought us right into the middle of hedge wolf territory."

Inwardly I winced. I was hoping he wouldn't notice that small fact. "Well, we'll just have to sneak through nice and quiet."

"Hedge wolves don't have ears," Ash continued. "They hunt by sensing the vibrations in the ground. And in the air. They're probably listening to us right now."

"Do you want to reach the Summer Court or not, princeling?" I challenged, crossing my arms. "This is the quickest way."

A rustle in a bramble patch drew our attention, and we caught a glint of a baleful green eye as something huge and bristly drew away into the shadows.

“And…there it goes to alert the rest of the pack.” Ash glared at me. “Why do things always happen when I’m around you?”

“Just lucky, I suppose,” I said cheerfully, as we hurried away before the rest of the pack could arrive.

* * *

It didn’t go as well as I planned. Hedge wolves were ambush predators, though certainly not the nastiest monsters we’d ever faced. But they were tricky bastards, and had the bad habit of looking exactly like an innocent briar patch until you were right up on them and then *boom,* you had this big, wolf-shaped bush lunging at your face. We dodged, ducked and slashed our way past the first dozen or so, avoiding the spiky bushes of death that leaped at us with no warning, or lunged out from the briars. Unfortunately hedge wolves also had the audacity to learn from past mistakes, and they started using strategy and group tactics against us.

We stepped into a clearing just as one of the bristly creatures slid into the brambles ahead of us. As we eased forward, tense and wary, four bushes around us sprang to life and charged. Ash and I spun, going back-to-back instinctively as the spiky creatures lunged from all sides. Ash’s sword lashed out, slicing one from the air as I stabbed upward with my dagger, caught a hedge wolf under the jaw and hurled it into its friend. The last wolf met a sudden end on Ash’s blade, but then without warning, *another* pair of brambles unfurled and lunged, catching us by surprise this time. I felt the spiky body of a huge wolf slam into me, knocking me flat, as the second wolf chomped down on the prince’s sword arm.

I felt a flash of cold behind me and winced. Ice-boy’s temper had finally snapped. From the corner of my eye, I saw the prince step forward, pushing his arm farther into the wolf’s jaws. There was another flash, and the hedge wolf stiffened as icicles burst out of its muzzle, punching through its jaws like giant needles. Ash grabbed the wolf’s muzzle with his free hand and yanked it down with a loud crack, snapping its jaw like a frozen twig. The wolf yelped, curled in on itself and stopped moving.

I scowled at the wolf above me, holding those nasty teeth away from my face. “Ugh, my friend, you really need a breath mint,” I told him, sending a pulse of glamour into the brambly monster above me. “Let’s see what we can do about that doggie breath.”

Vines grew from the wolf's thorny head, slithering over its face. They wrapped around its jaws like a muzzle, clamping them shut, and the wolf's eyes got huge and round. Whimpering pathetically, it leaped away, clawing at its face, and ran off, disappearing into the woods.

Dusting myself off, I climbed to my feet. "Well, that was… interesting," I ventured, deliberately ignoring Ash's glare. His sleeve was tattered, and blood smeared his forearm up to his elbow. "I don't remember hedge wolves ever doing that before."

"If I didn't need you to get into Summer…"

"Oh, but you do," I reminded him, grinning. "Let's not forget that, huh, ice-boy?" His expression darkened even more, but he turned away.

"Come on," Ash said, his voice even colder than normal. "We don't have time for your idiocy now."

"That's what I like about you Winter fey…you're all such scintillating wits, such clever purveyors of words, such wise and frolicsome—"

I ducked as a pinecone zipped by my head with enough force to have done more than muss my hair. A chuckle escaped me. "Always good to know you care, ice-boy." With a quick laugh I sprinted ahead, hoping to get out of range of any colder—and sharper—missiles that might be coming my way.

* * *

After the fiasco with the wolves, we separated for a bit, with the frosty prince vanishing into the surrounding woods to clean and bind his arm while I made camp. We couldn't wait for a later time. It was never a good idea to tromp through the wyldwood bleeding; you'd attract everything—and I mean *everything*—in the area. Besides, night was falling, and if we ventured any farther, we'd cross into the Fen Marches. Barghests and bog wraiths roamed those swamps at night, looking for victims, and though I wouldn't mind the challenge of crossing the swamps without being eaten or drowned, we had a mission to complete.

So, I found a grotto surrounded by glowing blue and orange fungi and carpeted in moss, cleared out a space and made a fire. Spearing a couple wild mushrooms I'd found earlier, I held the stick over the flames, leaning back contentedly. Ash hadn't returned, but knowing ice-boy he'd probably

go hunting once he was done with his arm. I wasn't worried; he'd find this place when he was ready.

I snorted, rolling my eyes. Unless the stubborn idiot decided to strike out on his own again. Hopefully he'd learned his lesson the last time he'd tried something like that.

A weight settled in my gut. I hadn't meant to think of that night, but now that I had, there was no use trying to forget. I gazed into the fire, letting my eyes unfocus, and the memories came creeping back.

It was an evening much like this one, in a place surrounded by glowing flowers, except it was Winter's territory and not the wyldwood. They hadn't seen me, hadn't known I was awake, but I had watched Ash and Meghan that night; listened as he told her he was leaving, alone, to retrieve the Scepter of the Seasons. I'd listened as he told her to go home, back to the mortal world, to forget him. I'd watched both their faces, Meghan's streaked with tears as she tried to be brave; Ash's torment carefully sealed away. I'd said nothing, done nothing, as he'd broken her heart, turned away and walked out of her life.

And…I'd been glad.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, disgusted with myself. I'd been *glad*, because Ash had crushed my princess's heart, because he was gone, and perhaps I could finally get her to look at me. I had been too patient, biding my time, waiting for the day the princess would open her eyes and see her faithful Puck as something more than a goofy friend. I would be more than her guardian and champion and the jester who made her laugh. I would be her everything, if I could.

With a sigh, I yanked the mushrooms from the fire and bit into them aggressively. After Ash had left, I'd tried to mend my princess's shattered heart, the one the stone-cold ice-prince had broken so efficiently. And for one blissful moment, I'd thought I had a chance. The memory of Meghan's kiss was seared into my brain, and I would never forget that day, one of the happiest moments of my life. But, against all odds, Meghan and Ash had found their way back to each other, defying every court of Faery to be together, and I was left behind. In the end, I'd lost her.

So why the hell am I still here?

"Goodfellow."

I jerked up. The deep voice wasn't Ash's; it was far too low and powerful to belong to the frosty ice-prince. I knew it instantly; it was a

voice that could command entire forests and woodlands, a voice that I had obeyed long before I ever met the mercurial prince of Winter.

Oberon stared at me over the fire, his eyes glowing amber in the shadows, the expression on his narrow face making the very ground quake in fear.

"Hello, Robin," Oberon murmured, unsmiling. "I fear we must have a little talk."

Aw, crap.

* * *

I stood warily, careless grin firmly in place, lacing my hands behind my head. Anyone else would've bowed or knelt or curtsied or at least nodded respectfully, but I'd known the Seelie King for such a long time, such formalities between us were completely useless. If I made any show of respect, Oberon would *know* something was up. As well as I knew him, the Summer King knew *me* just as well.

"Why, Oberon." I nodded, still smiling. "What are you doing here?" I eyed his armor and the great bow across his back. "Out for a little hunt? All by yourself? And you didn't invite me along? I'm hurt."

"Dispense with the foolishness, Robin." The Seelie King waved a hand, and thunder rumbled in the distance. Between us, the campfire flared like it wanted to jump out of the pit, and the plants surrounding us went nuts, writhing and twisting and dancing like they were ecstatic to see him. Such was the immense power of the Summer King. "We both know why I am here, I think. Where is the Unseelie prince?"

"Prince?" I frowned, though my heart started racing under my shirt. How had Oberon learned about Ash so quickly? We weren't even in Arcadia yet. "Why would you think I know anything about the Unseelie prince?" I asked, adopting my best innocent expression. "We're supposed to be enemies. In case you haven't heard, he made this teensy little oath to kill me someday."

None of that was a lie. Live as long as I have, and you become an expert at "dancing around the truth," as some put it. Unfortunately Oberon was no spring chicken, either.

"Robin." He gave me a patient look. "I know. I know what you are planning to do. Do you think I have no inkling of what goes on in my own

court? Titania is completely enamored of her new plaything. I know she stole it from Leanansidhe—she makes no secret of where she got it. I was wondering how Leanansidhe would react. Then I hear word of you and the Winter prince entering the wyldwood, heading for Arcadia. Do not think me a fool, Goodfellow. I know you plan to take Leanansidhe's toy back to her.

"However," he went on, before I could think of a new plan, one that would get me out of this without being turned into a bird or a rat for who knew how long, "you may relax, Robin. I am not here to stop you."

I didn't relax. In fact, this just made me more wary. I crossed my arms, raising an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"My lady wife has become quite distracted of late," the Seelie lord continued. "She dotes on her new toy and pays no attention to her court, her subjects, or her king. I dislike it."

Aha. And the truth came out. Oberon had always been the jealous type. Anything that took Titania's interest off him was cause for huge arguments between the two Seelie rulers. The last time something like this had happened, Titania had refused to give up a little Indian changeling, and Oberon had ordered me to put a love potion in her eyes so she would forget all about it.

We all know how *that* turned out.

I sighed, knowing where this was going. "Let me guess," I said. "You're going to be 'conveniently absent' from the Summer Court for a while. During which time, Titania's newest toy will mysteriously disappear, and you will have no knowledge of where it could have gotten to."

"I am going hunting with my knights and hounds," the Erlking replied with great dignity. "I care not what Titania does while I am away. However…" He stepped closer, filling the small grotto with his presence. His tall shadow loomed over me as he met my gaze. "I want you to think on something as well, Robin. Remember these words, when you go into Arcadia with your plan, whatever it is."

Oberon leaned in, his voice low and dark, whispering to me over the fire. "If your companion was suddenly…gone," he murmured, and a cold hand grabbed my stomach. "If the Winter prince were no longer here, how long do you think it would be before Meghan Chase came to you?"

I felt the breath whoosh out of me. I stared at Oberon, aghast. He gazed back calmly, unmovable as an oak. “What…are you…?” I couldn’t even finish the thought. “Why would you think…?”

“I know you love her,” Oberon went on, undeterred. “My daughter. I know your feelings for Meghan Chase, Robin. And I am here to tell you that I approve. I would rather see the two of you together, than her with the son of my ancient enemy.”

“Don’t ask for much, do you?” My voice came out harsh and raspy, and I turned away from him. All pretense of not knowing Ash had fled, along with most of my composure. Oberon’s gaze followed me as I took a few steps forward, grabbing the boughs of a small pine as I stared into the night. The fire crackled and popped behind me, and the heat of Oberon’s gaze burned between my shoulders like the hottest flame.

“What do you want me to do?” I muttered, gazing out into the night. “Stick a knife in his back when he’s not looking? Is that what you’re ordering me to do now?” My gut clenched at the thought. “You don’t think Meghan will have something to say about that? I’d never be able to hide that from her.”

“You need not do anything,” Oberon continued quietly. “Only expose the prince when you are in the Summer Court. Titania will do the rest. His blood will not be on your hands—you would only be doing what a true servant of the Summer Court would do. When the prince is gone, Meghan Chase will come to you for comfort. And all will be as it should.”

I couldn’t answer. I could almost feel Meghan against me, shaking with sobs as she mourned her Winter prince. I could feel my arms around her as I whispered that it would be okay, that she still had me, and I would never leave. And then I wanted to kick myself in the head for thinking that.

Oberon watched silently. “Robin Goodfellow,” he murmured. “Despite our past differences, I consider you my most trusted servant. We are old, older than the Winter prince. We have known each other a long time. But sometimes, I wonder if you realize you are still part of the Summer Court. It is your home. You do not need anything else.”

I clenched my fingers, feeling the branch splinter under my touch. If Oberon saw, he wasn’t concerned.

“My daughter is truly one of us now,” he went on. “Immortal. A queen of the fey. You have all the time in the world to make her fall in love with

you. It would not be hard—the two of you are already very close. I know you would find a way to be with her, even in the Iron Realm. Once you put your mind to something, Robin, there is no stopping it. But you must be rid of the Winter prince before she can see you."

I didn't answer. I felt the Seelie King draw back, preparing to go. "The choice is yours, of course," he said as the fire died down and the plants around us stopped their crazy writhing. "My hunt will take me far from Arcadia, far from the whispers of mischief plaguing the Summer Court. Do what you will, Robin, but remember, if you love my daughter, this could be your only chance to be with her in the end. Otherwise, you will lose Meghan Chase to the very one who has sworn to kill you."

A warm wind hissed through the grotto, stirring the fire and the leaves. When it faded, the space was empty, save for me. The Erlking was gone.

Chapter Three
My Mistress with a Monster Is in Love

Ash returned a few minutes later, sweeping into the grotto without preamble, carrying a brace of rabbit, which showed he had indeed been hunting. He tossed one at my feet, and without a word we began cleaning them, working in silence as the night closed in around us.

Kill Ash? Betray him to the Summer Court? What was Oberon thinking? As if I could do anything like that, even if it was technically Titania who would strike the fatal blow. And she would, too. Ash might be a prince, but Titania was a queen. You did not screw around with the queens of Faery; at least, you didn't go toe-to-toe with them, especially in their own court. Even I knew that. And with Oberon conveniently absent, Titania wouldn't spare the Winter prince. She would utterly destroy him.

I couldn't do that to ice-boy. Even after all the years of bad blood and fighting between us, even though he probably *would* try to kill me someday, and actually go through with it, I couldn't leave him to the mercy of Titania.

But…if I didn't, Meghan would never love me. My princess, the girl I'd do anything for, would never see me, never look at me the way she did Ash.

What made him so special? What did he have that I did not?

"You're awfully quiet."

I blinked and looked up from skinning the hare. Ash knelt a few feet from the fire, bent over his task, his hunting knife working with smooth efficiency. "W-what?" I blurted, a little too quickly. *Oh, that was brilliant, Goodfellow. Fix it, now.* "Me?" I continued, feigning shock. "Why, ice-boy, whatever do you mean? Could it be that you're actually concerned?"

He didn't look up as he continued. "You're hiding something," Ash said calmly. "If I can hear myself think through your chatter, that means something is up. Or about to go very, very wrong. Anything you want to tell me, Goodfellow?"

Damn, when had ice-boy become able to read me? That was something I was going to have to work on. “Yes,” I answered, forcing a grin. “I think turning you into a squirrel is the easiest way to sneak you into Arcadia. What do you think? Or, if you prefer, I could probably turn you into a mouse. Or a bird. Or a rabbit!” I looked at the skinned carcass in my hands. “Though that might go badly if Titania has her hounds anywhere about…”

“Never mind.” Ash sighed, shaking his head. “I’m sorry I said anything.”

“Ooh, I know!” I snapped my fingers. “A chameleon! That way you can perch on my collar and blend right in. It’s brilliant! And you’d make a very handsome chameleon, don’t you think, ice-boy?”

Ash rolled his eyes and bent lower over his task, tuning me out. I kept talking at him, useless, idle words that neither of us took seriously. It was a shield, a barrier for my real thoughts, which I couldn’t shut away no matter how hard I tried.

Why are you here?

For Meghan. That was the obvious answer. I was here for Meghan. Because I loved my princess and I wanted her to be happy. Even if her happiness meant she was with someone else. Even if that someone else was my arch rival. I wanted her to be happy.

Don’t you think you *could make her happy?*

I could. If she had picked me, I would’ve given her everything. I was the one who could make her laugh, who showed her the wonders of Summer magic, who had taken a bullet for her without question. (Which, by the way, hurt like a mother.) I was the one who protected her from her cruel human classmates, who walked her to and from the bus every day, who remembered her birthday when everyone else, even her own family, forgot. *Princess, why couldn’t you have chosen me? Wasn’t I good enough? Or is this my fault for waiting? For not making a move sooner?*

Damn. I’d thought I was over this. I’d thought I was fine in the friend zone, but I couldn’t get Oberon’s words out of my head. The Erlking, though he could be a manipulative, heartless bastard sometimes, was right. As long as Ash was around, Meghan would never see me as anything more than a friend.

So, you have to ask yourself, Goodfellow, who is more important? The woman you love and would do anything for, or the rival who has vowed to

kill you one day?

I watched Ash, brooding into the fire, his back to me as he poked at the flames. My once-friend turned enemy. What would the ruthless Unseelie prince do, were he in my position?

Abruptly I stood, making Ash glance back warily. “Going somewhere, Goodfellow?”

“Just for a walk, princeling. But I’m touched that you care.” I smirked at him, and he turned away, back to the fire. I made a face at his shoulder blades. “You know, I’m getting a little tired of talking to a stone wall,” I continued, walking to the edge of the grotto. “I think having a conversation with a dead fish would be more rewarding than yapping at you.”

“It’s never stopped you before.”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about.” I rolled my eyes. “But you’ll have to excuse me for needing some time alone, Prince. I have to figure out how I’m actually going to smuggle your icy carcass into the Summer Court.”

He looked up sharply. “I thought you had this planned out.”

“Oh, *now* we’re interested in a conversation, are we?” I chuckled and laced my hands behind my head. “Don’t worry, ice-boy, I’ll figure something out. I always do.”

He watched me, silently. I stared back, still smirking, daring him to say something, to argue. Finally he sighed and turned back to the fire.

“It’s your court,” I heard him mutter. “You know it better than I.”

Yeah, it is, I thought as I drew back and left him, walking into the forest. *It is my court; I’m part of Summer, and you’re supposed to be my enemy, Ash. Do you ever think about that? How you’re walking into enemy territory with someone who is supposed to be loyal to the Seelie Court?*

I hadn’t been entirely straightforward. I already knew how I was going to sneak his royal iciness into Arcadia, right under the nose of Titania and the Summer Guard, without anyone knowing he was there. It would be challenging; Ash was a Winter prince through and through. You couldn’t just slap a fake mustache on him and hope for the best, not with his glamour aura. Fortunately I’d been doing this a long time. If anyone could get a Winter gentry into the Summer Court unseen, it would be yours truly.

No, I just needed time alone. Time to think. Time to plan.

Time to figure out what I really wanted to do.

* * *

"No."

I rolled my eyes. "Ice-boy, come on. I least I'm not turning you into a lemur. This is the only way to get into the Summer Court without everyone knowing you're…you."

"There has to be another way."

"There isn't." I crossed my arms and glared. We had reached the border of Arcadia, and stood at the edge of the wyldwood, gazing across the river to the Erlking's lands on the other side. A wooden bridge, blooming with wildflowers, spanned the gulf, and two Summer Knights guarded the far side. Ash and I stood in a cluster of pine trees, watching them across the river, the churning rapids masking our hissed conversation.

"It's a *disguise,* Ash," I said again. "An illusion. We have to mask your Winter glamour with my Summer glamour, and we have to change your appearance so that people don't freak out the second you walk into the court. Really, it's the only way. How did you think this was going to go?"

Ash sighed, tilting his head back. "You're enjoying this far too much."

"Well." I shrugged, biting down a grin. "I can't say anything there." He glared ice-daggers at me, and I raised my hands. "Do you want to get into Arcadia, or not?"

"Fine." He made a frustrated, helpless gesture. "Do it. Let's get this over with."

"Thought you'd never say so." I pulled him farther back into the trees, calling my magic as I did.

"Hold still," I told him as he crossed his arms and tried to look bored and annoyed. "This won't take long, but I have to weave Summer glamour into the illusion so that it's strong enough to hide your Winter aura. If you were a redcap or an ice-gnome, it wouldn't take very much, but you're *you*, so this is going to be considerably more challenging." I felt my Summer magic settle over him, felt it recoil from the icy chill of the Winter glamour surrounding him like a suit of armor, and frowned. "Ice-boy, stop fighting me. If you want to get this stupid favor over and done with, this is the only way. You have to let me help you." He snorted, and the protective cloak of Winter glamour vanished.

I drew more Summer magic to me and sent it toward the prince, weaving the illusion over and around him. His magic resisted me—say what you want about the Winter prince, at his core, Ash was incredibly strong. He knew who he was, and someone of lesser skill couldn't have turned him into something he was not, even if it was just an illusion.

But I'm not your average trickster, either.

Ash's outline shimmered and started to change. He didn't grow, or shrink, but his hair lengthened, falling down his back, and went from jet-black to the color of wheat. His pale skin turned golden-brown, as if he'd spent a lifetime in the sun, and his cold silver eyes flashed before turning a bright, glittering blue.

His clothes changed as well, the long black coat vanishing into mist, replaced with armor of gold and green, the proud head of a huge stag adorning the breastplate. A fancy gold cloak settled around him, the edges trimmed with leaves, something Ash wouldn't be caught dead in. When it was done, no trace of the Winter prince stood in the spot beneath the pines. A Summer sidhe waited in the shadows, only his scowl bearing the faintest resemblance to the youngest son of Queen Mab.

I put a hand to my mouth in mock delight. "Oh, ice-boy, it's…it's…so you!"

"I'm going to kill you for this," Ash growled, then winced at how his voice sounded, high and clear. I bit my cheek to keep from howling with laughter. If he drew his sword, it would shatter the illusion, and then we'd have to go through all this again.

"Yeah, well, do it later, ice-boy. Remember, you can't use any Winter glamour in there at all, or the spell will unravel. That includes drawing your sword and throwing icicles at me, so let's not start any fights with any Summer gentry while we're here, okay? We just want to get in, grab the violin and get out again."

Ash nodded. I stepped back and tossed the same illusion over myself, making a pair of almost identical Summer Knights. Glancing at my fellow guard, I grinned. "Ready?"

He sighed again, raking his fingers through his now unfamiliar hair. "Lead the way."

* * *

The two knights guarding the bridge nodded politely as we crossed, but other than that didn't even glance at us. I caught one of them hiding a smirk as we passed, but that was understandable, given the circumstances. I didn't think ice-boy had seen it, but I was wrong.

"Who are we supposed to be?" Ash asked as we continued into the lands of the Erlking. Past the bridge, the heat of the summer sun blazed down on us, warming my skin and making me sigh with pleasure. Of all the things in the Seelie Court, I missed the sun the most. The wyldwood was too dark and Tir Na Nog was too cold; only in Arcadia did the sun shine full and bright, and the sweetest apples grow on the trees over the thorn fence, always ripe for the picking. If you could get past the two cranky giants who owned the orchard, that is.

"Oh," I said, grinning. "Right. Names. Well, you're Sir Torin, and I'm Sir Fagan, and we're two hedge knights who travel all over the Nevernever on quests of glory for our king and court. You know, we right wrongs and slay dragons and search for mythological treasures, stuff like that."

"So, they're well respected."

"Well…" I scratched the back of my head. "Not exactly."

Ash stared at me. "What do you mean, not exactly?"

"Ever read *Don Quixote*?" I asked. And Ash closed his eyes, indicating that, yes, he had read it. I snickered. "They're very eager," I continued, trying not to laugh at the look on his face, "and they do have very noble intentions, I will give them that. But those two couldn't find their way out of a broom closet without a map. It's sheer dumb luck that they haven't gotten themselves killed or eaten by now. They keep begging Oberon to send them on noble, important quests to prove their worth, and Oberon ends up giving them some ridiculous mission just to get them out of his hair."

"And, of course, these are the identities you stole for us."

"It's perfect, don't you think?" I flung my arms out grandly. "Sir Torin and Sir Fagan are almost never at court, the other knights usually avoid them and we have a reason to go see Queen Titania, to announce the completion of our most recent quest."

"And if the real Torin and Fagan happen to be there?"

"Well." I shrugged, annoyed with his logic. "Then we'll improvise."

I could tell Ash didn't like it; he was always the plan-for-anything type, and usually found my play-it-by-ear tactics annoying and disturbing.

But he didn’t say anything more, and it wasn’t long before we came to the huge mound of grassy earth that marked the entrance into Oberon’s court. Thick brambles surrounded the rise, though they parted easily before us, letting us through, and we walked toward the side of the hill without breaking stride.

“Anything else I should know about?” Ash muttered as we approached the mound side by side. “Any small detail you conveniently overlooked that might come up while we’re here?”

“Um…” I shot him a sideways glance. “Just one more small thing.” He raised an eyebrow, and I chewed my lip. Oh, he was not going to like this. “Torin and the queen are rumored to be…um…involved.”

“What?”

But then we were through the side of the hill and stepping into a courtyard teeming with Summer fey—the heart of Arcadia.

Music played, one of my favorite tunes about sun and shadows and growing things, and lying at the bottom of a cool stream while the fish whispered to you. Trees lining the edge of the courtyard sighed softly, moving their branches to the song, and the thousands of flowers blooming everywhere swayed gently in rhythm. Dryads, satyrs, gnomes and other Summer fey milled about the open space, sitting on benches, talking, or dancing together in the grass. Yep, I was definitely home.

I could feel Ash’s glare on the back of my head, and knew he was ready to kill me, but the fey closest to the edge of the courtyard spotted us and leaped to their feet.

“Be nice, ice-boy,” I said through clenched teeth, plastering a grin on my face as the crowd came forward. “They’re coming, so smile and don’t stab your partner. It’s showtime.”

“Sir Fagan!” a female satyr exclaimed, skipping up to us. Her hooves clopped daintily over the cobblestones. “Sir Torin! You’ve returned, and you’re alive. Welcome back!”

“How were your travels, Sir Fagan?” asked a nymph, giving me a sly smile. “Did you manage to get the Treasure of the Moonbeast this time? Did you slay the dreaded Worm of the Fellswamp? Tell us of your adventures.”

“Yes, yes,” echoed a brownie. “What happened?”

“Yes, tell us!”

“Tell us your story!”

I raised a hand. “Enough, fair people, enough! There will be time enough for stories and songs and tales of daring-do, but that time is not now.” They quieted down, looking disappointed, and I gave a tired sigh. “Sir Torin and I have traveled far and wide, and we are weary. We have many tales to tell, yes, but first we must speak to our lord.”

“Lord Oberon has left court for a time,” the satyr explained, watching me with big hazel eyes. Her gaze abruptly flickered to “Torin” beside me, and she grinned. “But Queen Titania is here, and I’m sure she would be pleased to receive you. Would you like me to find a messenger to announce your return?”

“That would be much appreciated, fair lady,” Ash said at my shoulder, startling me. The satyr beamed and skipped off, and we made our way toward the gate separating the courtyard from Oberon’s inner sanctum. Summer fey smiled at us and nodded or hid grins and whispers behind their hands. We ignored them. So far, so good. Step one, getting into the Summer Court, had gone off without a hitch. Now all we had to do was find Leanansidhe’s violin and get out of Arcadia without blowing our cover. And, knowing the Summer Queen and her obsessive tendencies, it would probably be somewhere in her private chambers. That was going to make things…challenging.

I glanced at Ash. I could think of *one* way to get into the queen’s bedroom, but he would probably flip out if I suggested that, so I kept my mouth shut.

“What?” Ash sighed. I blinked.

“Huh?”

“You’re giving me that look,” he continued as we stopped several yards from the gates, which were guarded by two massive trolls in red and brass uniforms. “That look that says you have a plan and I’m not going to like it. At all.”

“Well…yes, I do have an idea…”

“And?”

“And…you’re not going to like it. At all.”

He sighed again, rubbing his eyes. “I think I already have an inkling of what you’re going to say,” he muttered, looking pained. I shrugged.

“It *would* be the easiest way to see if she’s keeping the violin in her chambers. You could even offer to serenade her.”

“If Titania discovers me, I’ll be dead before I have a chance to draw my sword.”

And wouldn’t that be a tragedy? “Ice-boy,” I said, grinning, “please. As if I would let that happen. Your disguise is foolproof. Just don’t use Winter glamour, and you’ll be fine.”

Ash ran his fingers through his hair and leaned closer. “Puck,” he said in a harsh voice. “I…I can’t do it. This isn’t a game anymore. You’re asking me to seduce the queen of the Summer Court. This is high treason and besides…” He looked away, his face tightening. “I’m still Meghan’s knight. My vow…”

“Do you want to get the violin back, or not?” He actually looked stricken, and I felt a little sorry for the guy. “Look, ice-boy,” I whispered, “I don’t expect you to take her to bed, or even kiss her. Just the thought of that…*ugh!*” I shuddered and pushed the thought away, drawing my dagger in a smooth, furtive motion. “Oh, great, now that image is stuck in my head forever. Just…flirt a little. Be charming. Tell her about your ‘adventures.’ Then if she gets too touchy-feely, excuse yourself and get out. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I didn’t think you would. Hold still.” Swiftly I brought the dagger up, cutting a strand of his long hair before he could react. It dropped into my palm, and I curled my fist around it. “Perfect. Much obliged, ice-boy.”

Ash reared back, eyes flashing, fingers going to his sword. I shot him a warning glare, and he remembered himself, dropping his hand from the hilt.

“What are you doing, Goodfellow?” he snarled.

“Keep it down, Prince.” I studied the strand between my fingers, watching it change from pale blond to jet-black, and smirked. “It’s all part of the plan, don’t worry.”

With a loud creak, the gates swung open and a satyr in a herald’s uniform padded through, beckoning to us urgently. “Well, here we go, ice-boy. Try to keep it together in front of the queen.”

Chapter Four
Ill Met by Moonlight, Proud Titania

We walked through the gate into the flowering tunnel of thorns on the other side. I breathed in deeply and sighed, loving the potent, fragrant smells of the forest. Beside me, Ash did not look as enamored. His posture was stiff, tense. I guess I couldn't blame the guy, walking into the heart of enemy territory, surrounded by Summer fey, unable to use his magic or his weapon. I might've felt bad for him, if the whole thing wasn't so darn amusing.

The tunnel ended in a curtain of vines. Dark shapes and a haunting, eerie tune filled the air on the other side. The melody pulled at my stomach, a sad, sweet sound, before I shook it off. Looking at Ash, and the pale determination on his face, I gave him a savage grin.

"No turning back now, ice-boy," I muttered, and swept through the curtain into the room beyond.

Oberon and Titania's throne room was a massive clearing with cathedral-size trees creating a vaulted ceiling overhead. Thick moss carpeted the floor, and briars hemmed in the edges of the clearing. A waterfall trickled into a crystal pool, where will-o-the-wisps and piskie lights danced, bobbing through the clearing like drunken stars. Summer gentry, in their ridiculously fancy outfits, sat or stood around a pair of thrones in the middle of the clearing, one empty, but the other quite occupied.

Oberon wasn't here, of course, but Queen Titania sat on her throne with the smug, lazy grace of a cat overseeing a flock of mice.

Everyone says the Summer Queen is stunning, beautiful, absolutely captivating. Yeah, I guess she is, but so is a volcanic eruption, and probably less volatile. Working in the Seelie Court is certainly interesting at times, to say the least. The Summer rulers have caused floods and wildfires in the mortal world with their arguments, and Titania once threatened to sink an entire village into the mud because of a

misunderstanding over a missing hairpin. Fortunately Oberon can usually calm her rages and temper tantrums…when he decides to involve himself, that is. Many times, he turns a blind eye to his wife's activities—until they affect him, of course.

None of the nobles in the clearing seemed to notice us as we came in, their attention riveted to Titania, or something at the foot of her throne. Ash took in the room in one smooth, practiced glance, and his eyes suddenly widened. I followed his gaze, and my heart sank.

The music we'd heard in the tunnel, the slow, lilting melody that was haunting and dark and beautiful, wasn't played by any of Titania's harp girls or servants or faery musicians. The melody had been strange at first, because it was of a kind not normally heard in the faery courts. It wasn't a harp, or a flute or any of the strange magical instruments found only in our world.

It was a violin. Being played by a mortal girl no older than eight, her small body tight as she sawed and ripped at the strings. She wore a simple black dress, and her long, mahogany hair was the same color as the instrument in her arms. Her eyes were closed as she played for her inhuman audience, her thin body swaying back and forth, ignorant of the queen's dainty white hand resting atop her skull.

And I knew. Leanansidhe's prized possession, and Titania's newest plaything, wasn't the instrument in the girl's tiny, skillful fingers.

It was the girl herself. This was our "violin."

Well, things just got a lot more complicated.

The song came to an end, and the girl's eyes opened, dark and serious and a tad bemused, as if she wasn't quite sure if this was a dream or not. The gentry tittered, clapping their hands and breathing small sighs of admiration, while Queen Titania gave a small, pleased smile.

"That was beautiful, Vi," she purred, combing the girl's hair with her fingers. The small human blinked and gazed up at the faery queen with solemn eyes.

"The ending was flat," she said regretfully. Her voice was reedy and breathless, as if the violin had taken all the volume from her. "And it was rushed in the beginning." She sniffed and bit her bottom lip. "I'm sorry, I wanted to play it better."

"Oh, my dear, it was perfect." Titania smoothed the hair back from the girl's face. "Wasn't it?" she added, looking fiercely at the nobles, who

tittered and nodded and made appropriate noises of agreement. Beside me, Ash muttered something inaudible and shot me a sideways glance.

"A child," he muttered. "Leanansidhe's 'toy' is a child. How are we going to get her out, Goodfellow?"

"I'm thinking."

"Think faster."

"Now," the queen continued, tugging at the girl's dress, straightening it, "would you like something to eat, my darling? Then, if you want, you can play for us again after you've eaten."

Vi sniffled. "Can I have cake?"

"Of course, my dear." The queen smiled indulgently. "Would you like that?"

The girl nodded eagerly. Titania bent down and kissed her cheek. "Then I will have Cook bring you the sweetest cakes she can find."

The child beamed. Titania snapped her fingers, and a brownie appeared at her arm. "You heard her," she told it. "Tell Cook we want her best and sweetest cakes, as quickly as possible."

"The little strawberry ones," Vi added, smiling up at the queen. Titania nodded at the brownie, who bowed and scampered off, fleeing into the hedge. The queen chuckled and patted the girl's head like she would a favorite small dog.

"Isn't she darling?" she mused, and the nobles were quick to agree. "Such talent, and at such a young age. I don't know how Leanansidhe could stand to give her up."

She laughed, and the gentry laughed with her. The girl sat there with her hands in her lap, gazing vacantly at the faeries surrounding her. As the chuckles died down, the queen finally spotted us at the edge of the clearing, and her blue eyes lit up with delight.

"Oh, but my dears, we are being very rude." The queen sat up, raising a slender hand to us. "We have esteemed visitors, returned from yet another impossible quest. Sir Fagan, Sir Torin, please step forward."

I saw Ash draw in a quiet breath, steeling himself, and bit down my anticipation. "Here we go," I whispered, throwing out my chest. "Just follow my lead."

Chin up, chest puffed out, I raised my head and swaggered toward the waiting queen.

Titania laced her fingers together and watched us approach, a small smile on her perfect lips. But her gaze wasn't fastened on me, but the "Summer knight" at my side. Ash, much to his credit, was playing his part, keeping his head up and a faint, proud smile on his face, his gaze only for the queen. *Good,* I thought as we reached the foot of the throne and bowed. *Keep looking at ice-boy. Pay no attention to the buffoon next to him. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.*

"Sir Fagan." Titania spared me a cursory glance. "Sir Torin." She smiled widely at Ash. "Welcome back. I apologize for my husband—he is away from court at the moment and I am not sure when he will return."

"We are sorry to have missed Lord Oberon," Ash said, his voice confident and clear, and slightly pompous. He took the queen's outstretched hand and brought it to his lips. "But to be in your presence, my lady—that is worth all the blessings of our good king."

I resisted the urge to stare at him, biting down a grin. *Well, look at you, ice-boy. Playing the part, after all. I forgot you know how to do this, too, if pushed hard enough.*

"Oh, Sir Torin." Titania blushed, somehow managing to look embarrassed and self-conscious even as she preened. "You are such a flatterer. And we are so glad that you have returned. You must have stories to tell, my dear Sirs. The court is most anxious to hear your newest adventures." She clasped her hands together. "I simply insist you join us in the Grand Dining Hall tonight. Let us toast your noble quests, recognize your great deeds and you can hear my newest acquisition play for you." She stroked the girl's hair again, but Ash didn't even glance at the human.

"That would please us greatly, your majesty."

"It is decided, then." Titania nodded regally, dismissing us. "We will meet again tonight. I am most anxious to hear what you have been up to in the time you've been gone."

We bowed, and Ash reached down a second time and brought the back of the queen's hand to his lips. "Until tonight, my lady," he murmured, and we left the queen's court, feeling her eyes on us until we ducked back into the tunnel.

I held in my laughter until we were well away from the throne room, before turning on Ash with a gleeful cackle. "What was *that*, ice-boy? Since when did you get to be such a charmer? I didn't think you had it in you."

His face flamed. “I did what I had to do,” he said, crossing his arms and looking away. “We got close to the queen and saw what Leanansidhe sent us for. Now the question is, how do we get her away from Titania? How do we get her out of the Summer Court?”

“Worry not, ice-boy. I already have a plan.” I flashed him my best impish smile, rubbing my hands together. “One brilliant Goodfellow prank, coming right up.”

* * *

The Grand Dining Hall wasn’t really a hall, more of a marble courtyard underneath the stars, surrounded on all sides by a giant hedge maze. In the very center, surrounded by hedgy unicorns and lions, the Summer Queen held her most extravagant parties at a long white and gold table, very reminiscent of a certain Mad Hatter’s tea party. To be invited to one of these affairs, you had to be a personal favorite of the queen, or the next one on her figurative chopping block. Needless to say, Oberon never attended.

The labyrinth was easy for “Sir Torin” and I to navigate, despite a couple statues that tried pointing us in the wrong direction, and all too soon we reached the table in the center of the maze. It was surrounded by Seelie gentry in their fanciest clothes, gowns of feathers and rose petals, cloaks of baby’s breath and spiderwebs. And at the head of the table, her golden hair braided with flowers and sparkling moonstones, the Summer Queen smiled and waved us over.

Vi, the mortal child, sat in a chair on the queen’s right, solemnly plowing her way through an impressive fountain of pink and blue cake. Her violin sat on a pillow, held by a waiting satyr behind the girl’s chair. She didn’t look up as we approached, but the queen gave us a welcoming smile.

“Now,” Titania purred after introductions were made and the rest of the gentry were settled, “let us hear of your latest adventures, knights. Sir Torin, would you like to regale the court with your mighty quests and deeds?”

Beside me, Torin lowered his head. “Ah, my lady, nothing would make me happier.” He nodded to me with a small frown. “However, I believe Sir Fagan has won the right to sing of our adventures this evening. We made a

bet on who would have the honor, and I lost. If it pleases you, I will leave the storytelling to him."

Titania pouted a bit then brightened. "Very well, then, Sir Torin. I insist you keep me company for the evening. It is the least you can do." She gestured to the empty spot on her left. "Do sit, Sir Torin. Relax for a while. Let my servants attend you for a change."

"My lady, it is not proper—"

"I will decide what is proper in my court or not, Sir." Titania's voice was like a velvet coating over steel. "As you can see, my husband is not here, so I have the need to be protected from the riffraff at court. What better protection than having a famed knight errant at my side?" She gestured to the seat, more firmly this time. "Sit, Sir Torin. That is an order from your queen."

Sir Torin sat. Vi stared at him over the table, frosting covering her mouth, but Titania didn't even glance at the child. Her attention seemed to have completely shifted to the knight sitting at her elbow. Torin met the queen's gaze and gave a hesitant, furtive smile.

"Well, Sir Fagan," Titania said without looking at me, "it seems we are to listen to you sing of your adventures tonight. I do hope it will prove entertaining."

Oh, you have no idea. "Certainly, my queen." I grinned. Spinning away from the happy couple, I marched to the center of the courtyard, pulling out a lute as I did. Sir Fagan—the real Sir Fagan, that is—could do a fair job of strumming a tune, but tonight would be his most memorable performance yet.

My fingers flew over the lute strings, and I sang about two knights, sent by their king to retrieve the Treasure of the Moonbeast, only neither of them knew what it was. After weeks of searching and getting no answers, it was decided that the Treasure of the Moonbeast must be on the moon itself, and they needed the great pearl at the bottom of the Mermaid Queen's ocean, rumored to be able to draw the moon down from the sky if taken from water. Both knights nearly drowned, fighting off waves of sirens and mermen as they fled back to dry land, but they did manage to steal the pearl. However, when they held it up to see if it would really capture the moon as the legends stated, the pearl slipped from their fingers, rolled off a cliff and fell back into the ocean from whence it came.

The Summer gentry roared with that tale, laughing and clapping, calling for more. I glanced at the head of the table and saw Torin and the queen, deep in conversation, paying little attention to me. Titania was leaning close to the knight, speaking in whispers, and Torin was nodding solemnly. Perfect.

"This next song," I announced, as my audience fell silent, "is a tale about lost love, and how we must never take for granted what we have right now."

This time, the song was soft and slow, full of yearning, about a knight who loved a noblewoman but feared expressing his love because of their difference in rank. It was a sad tune, and I made it as heart-wrenching as I could, weaving a bit of glamour into the notes for a bigger impact. I noticed two gentry who listened, enraptured, then stood and wandered away into the maze together.

I kept my gaze on Torin and the queen as I sang. They didn't look up, but Titania's head moved closer and closer to the knight, until only a few inches separated them. Sir Torin didn't shy away once, capturing her hand as it reached up to his face, pressing it to his lips.

Abruptly the queen stood. Beckoning to a servant, she whispered something to him, pointing to Vi as she did. The satyr bowed his head and returned to the girl, taking away the cake and motioning her to follow. As the human and the satyr left the party, I grinned to myself.

Stage one, complete. Guess Vi isn't going to be entertaining us this evening, after all. Now, my Summer Queen. You've sent away your little pet; are you going to take the bait?

Titania stretched luxuriously, then stepped up and lightly touched Torin's shoulder, bending down to whisper in his ear. Yes, she was. Trailing her fingers down his arm, the queen stepped away, gave him a sultry look and sauntered off into the hedge maze.

Torin waited a few heartbeats, then looked up at me. I nodded.

Casually the knight rose, glancing warily around. No one was paying attention to him, their focus riveted on me, or each other. Several nobles were dancing now, in groups of twos and threes, their expressions dreamy and dazed. No one saw the Summer knight step away from the table and wander into the hedge maze after the queen. I kept the song going for several stanzas after he disappeared, then finally brought it to a close.

And that's stage two. I gazed around at my handiwork. *Yep, you still have it, Goodfellow. Amazing what one teensy love song can do to weaker minds. Too bad we don't have more time; it's been a while since I've made anyone dance for three days straight.*

Now, on to the last stage.

I bowed to my audience. "Everyone!" I called as Summer gentry looked around in dazed confusion. "You've been a fabulous audience! But I'm afraid I really must dash! When the screaming starts, try not to stampede all at once. You all have a wonderful rest of the evening!"

They blinked at me, not really hearing a word I'd said, still caught up in their swirling emotions. I bowed once more and hurried, unchallenged, into the maze.

I knew where Torin and the queen would be. I'd been through this maze countless times, usually to crash the queen's party or spy on the queen's guests. Sometimes it was at Oberon's request, sometimes it was for my own amusement. But I knew where I would find the wayward couple: at the hidden spring in the northeast corner of the maze, where Titania took all her "prospects."

I heard their voices as I approached, slipping past the countless lions, hounds and unicorn topiaries lining the paths. Peeking around a mermaid fountain, I spotted the queen and the Summer knight near the edge of the pool. Titania was very close to Torin and had a slender hand on the knight's chest, leaning close.

"My lady," the knight was saying. "I…I cannot do this…anymore. What of your husband? Lord Oberon—"

"Lord Oberon," Titania murmured, putting a finger against his mouth, "is not here. And what Oberon does not know—" she leaned in closer, her lips parting "—will not hurt him."

I took a deep breath. *Well, here we go*.

"You are so right, Queen Titania!" Dropping my disguise, I stepped out from behind the fountain. "What Oberon doesn't know will not hurt him. Why, I tell myself that almost every single day. It's so nice to know we have so much in common."

Titania jumped, stepping back from Torin, her eyes going wide as she saw me. "Robin Goodfellow!" she spat, curling her lips into a grimace of hate. For just a moment, she hesitated, then rose up to her full height, glaring down her nose at me. "How *dare* you! How dare you come here

uninvited, especially when my husband is away from court! Or…did he put you up to this?" She gave me a look of black contempt. "You've always been his little spy, his good little watchdog, always there for the tasks he finds too distasteful to do himself. Pathetic. You both are pathetic!" Lightning flickered overhead, streaking down to smash into a bush, setting it aflame. I resisted the urge to wince. In the flickering shadows, the Summer Queen's eyes blazed blue-white. "Perhaps the great Robin Goodfellow will meet with an unfortunate accident," the queen mused, the wind snapping at her hair as she raised a pale hand. "Something that will silence him completely for a few centuries."

"Now, now." I waggled a finger, giving her a fearsome smile. "I would think you'd want to reward me, my good queen. After all, I just stopped you from making a highly embarrassing mistake. You've been duped, my lady. Taken advantage of. You have an enemy right under your nose, and you didn't even realize it."

Torin glared stonily. I ignored him and faced Titania, who was watching me with wary, but curious, distrust. "What trickery are you playing at, Goodfellow?" she asked.

"Believe what you will," I continued, staring her down. "Call me what you want, hate me if you will, but I'm still a faithful servant of the Summer Court. This is my home, and I would do anything to protect it. And when it comes to my attention that we've been invaded by an enemy, I can't sit by and do nothing, even if it means warning *you*."

"What are you—" The queen straightened abruptly. "Leanansidhe," she hissed, narrowing her eyes. "She sent someone. Someone to steal my human pet. Where—"

"Right under your nose, my queen. Just like I told you." And before either of them could react, I spun on Torin and stripped away glamour, shredding his Summer disguise and revealing the form of the Winter prince to the Summer Queen. "*There's* your enemy, Queen Titania. Do with him what you will."

Chapter Five
If We Shadows Have Offended

Betrayal.

That was the first look Ash turned on me, his silver eyes wide with shock and disbelief. I grinned at him, crossing my arms, as Titania's outraged shriek rose above the howl of the wind. Before Ash could do anything, she swept her arm down, and a streak of lightning slammed into the prince's chest, hurling him away. He smashed into the mermaid statue and crumpled at the base, dazed.

"Ouch." I winced. "That looked painful. Hit him again, just to make sure he stays down."

Titania spun on me. "You!" she raged, her eyes seriously scary now. I blinked at her innocently and took a step back. "I do not know how you did this, or why, but this is one of your pranks, I know it! What foul mischief do you have up your sleeve this time?"

"Me?" I grinned and laced my hands behind my head. "You give me too much credit, Queen Titania."

"I am not a fool, Robin Goodfellow." Titania loomed over me, lightning flashing threateningly overhead. "The Winter prince is cunning and strong, but he could not have acted alone. You snuck the prince into Arcadia—you are the only one whose glamour is strong enough to hide him from me. Before I make the son of Mab beg for mercy, I want to know why you did this! You were *friends* once, long ago. Why this sudden change of heart?"

I stuck my hands deep in my pockets, looked the Seelie Queen right in the eye and muttered, "Because. He fell in love with *my* princess."

Silence for a few heartbeats. At the base of the fountain, Ash stirred, but the Queen's attention was solely on me.

"Ah." Titania actually smiled, the scary look in her eyes fading slightly. "And now, it makes sense. Robin Goodfellow, you *do* have a bit of

a nasty streak in you, after all. Oberon's little dog has some bite." The queen tittered, giving me an appraising look. "I'm almost proud of you."

"I didn't do it for you," I replied. "I did it for Meghan. And I did it for me. And if you want to make ice-boy pay for your humiliation, you'd better do something about him real soon. He's on his feet already."

Titania spun. Ash stood beside the fountain, glaring at me as he backed away, his sword drawn. The Summer Queen sent another bolt of lightning at him, but Ash ducked behind the fountain and the bolt smashed several fish into marble fragments. The queen hissed in fury, and I gave Ash a lazy smile.

"Better run, ice-boy!"

The Winter prince was already going. Diving away, he rolled behind a lion shrub as another bolt came slashing down, barely missing him. Leaping to his feet, he tore off into the maze.

"Stop him!" The Summer Queen raised her arms, glamour whirling and snapping about. "Stop him!" she called again, as the hedge lions, hounds, unicorns and other topiaries stirred, then leaped off their bases with howls and roars. "Go!" shrieked the queen, flinging out a hand. "Find the Winter prince. Hunt him down and tear him to pieces!"

The bushes roared and scattered into the maze. I heard yelps and screams coming from the center of the courtyard as the nobles' party was rudely interrupted. Titania waited a moment, and then turned on me.

"I will find him!" she snarled, eyes flashing electric blue in the darkness. "He will pay for this humiliation! Goodfellow, call the guards, the knights, the servants. Alert the rest of Arcadia. The Winter prince will not leave this court alive!"

I bowed. "Certainly, my queen," I drawled. "And may I suggest squads of at least four to six knights if you're going to have them looking for ice-boy? Unless you want to find frozen shish kebabs littering the halls all the way to the wyldwood. Ash is pretty handy with that sword."

Titania's eyes glowed as she raised her hand. With a flash of lightning, the smell of burned earth and smoke rose up from the ground, and the Summer Queen was gone.

I took a deep breath and clenched my fists to stop the shaking. *Final stage, complete. That was easier than I thought. Now…if only the other part went off without a hitch…*

"Nice performance, Goodfellow," said a voice at my back.

I turned wearily as Ash stepped out of the shadows of the maze, still wearing his disguise as a Summer knight. He carried a sleeping child, held tightly to his chest. Vi snored softly, smears of blue frosting around her mouth. With the amount of sleeping powder she'd gorged on tonight, she would probably be out for several hours. All that flirting with the huge troll cook in the kitchen, just to sneak the powder into the frosting mix, hadn't gone to waste at least.

"Oh, good, you found her." I tried to grin at him, but I was feeling oddly tired at the moment. "Yeah, it *was* quite the performance, wasn't it? Good enough to fool a faery queen and the entire Summer Court. This will probably go down in history." Ash didn't smile, and I sighed. "So, how much of that did you hear?"

"Enough."

"That so?" I gave him a half-weary, half-challenging look. "And do you have anything to say about that, ice-boy?"

"No." He shook his head solemnly. "You said what you had to. You did what was required to get the job done."

"Oh? That's awfully generous of you, Prince."

"None of it was a lie, Goodfellow." Ash gave me a hard stare. "Nothing you said or did was against your nature. That's why Titania believed you so quickly. I would have believed it, too."

I sighed. "Good to know where I stand," I muttered, and scrubbed a hand over my eyes. "Well, come on then, ice-boy. Let's get out of here before Titania catches your doppelganger and finds nothing is holding him together but twigs, string and a bit of your hair. With all the commotion going on, it should be easy to sneak out nice and quiet."

Not entirely. Thanks to my little Ash clone, the Summer Court was in chaos, scrambling over each other looking for him, but our escape wasn't entirely without problems. We ran into a lion topiary that needed to be cut down, and ice-boy's disguise finally shattered when he drew his sword to battle the creature. Of course, right after that, we ran into a squad of Summer knights and played a rousing game of catch-me-if-you-can before we finally escaped into the hedge. With the knights hot on our heels, I led us down a twisting tunnel of bramble that got smaller and smaller until it abruptly came to an end.

Ash muttered a curse and looked around as the sound of booted feet crashed toward us through the branches.

“Did you take a wrong turn, Goodfellow?” he growled.

“Relax, ice-boy. I know what I’m doing.” Fishing under an old log, I pulled out a simple green cloth, ripped and torn with use. Shaking it open, I hung it on a pair of thorns then peeled it back to reveal a narrow hole in the brambles. Ash ducked through carrying Vi, and I followed, tearing the cloth away as I did. The wall of thorns vanished, and the sounds of pursuit cut out as suddenly as if you flicked off the TV. As darkness closed in, I sighed in relief.

“Where are we?” Ash whispered close by.

I snapped my fingers, and a cheerful fire leaped up in a stone fireplace, illuminating a small log cabin with wooden floors and pillars made of live trees. A thatch roof covered the ceiling, and small animals peered at us from the corners, more curious than afraid.

“Welcome,” I said, grinning at Ash, “to my humble abode.”

Ash gazed around the tiny cabin in wary amazement. “This is *your* house, Goodfellow?”

“One of several.” I shooed a fox out of an armchair and sank down into it with a sigh. “I like to have a little place I can retreat to, to escape the craziness of the court, to relax without anyone knowing where I am.”

“To hide out when Oberon is ready to kill you.”

“Ouch, ice-boy. Be nice in my home, will you? Don’t make me regret bringing you here.” I leaned back in the chair and propped my feet on a nearby footstool, crossing my legs. “Don’t worry, this place is in the mortal world—no one from court can sense where we are anymore.”

Ash looked relieved. “So, we’re out,” he murmured, glancing back at the wall where, a few seconds ago, we had supposedly come straight through the wood. “We found the ‘violin’ and got out of the Summer Court.” He looked at the sleeping girl in his arms and sighed. “So, I guess the only question is, what do we do now?”

I pointed to a bed in the corner. He approached and laid the mortal atop the covers, surprisingly gentle for a Winter prince. I didn’t remember him being so careful before he met Meghan. Vi stirred a little and muttered “Mommy” in her sleep, but didn’t wake up.

“Leanansidhe will be waiting for us,” I said as the fox jumped into my lap and curled up again, wrapping its bushy tail around its nose. I absently stroked its short red fur. “She’s probably on her way right now.”

“Yeah.” Ash sighed, crossing his arms as he watched the girl. “How do you want to do this, Goodfellow?”

I thought a few moments, then swung my feet off the stool and rose, dumping the fox to the floor again. It gave an annoyed bark and trotted out the door. “Don’t worry, ice-boy,” I said cheerfully, and walked upstairs to grab something. “I have one last little trick up my sleeve.”

Chapter Six
And Robin Shall Restore Amends

"Darlings!"

Standing in the long grass in front of the cabin, Leanansidhe beamed at us as we stepped outside, the girl still fast asleep in the prince's arms. "You found her, darlings! I knew you would. I had complete faith in your abilities. Oh," she sighed, bringing a hand to her chest, "I wish I could see the look on Titania's face when she discovers her little toy is missing."

Ash stepped forward. "Our deal is finished," he said firmly. "We found what was stolen and brought it back to you. I've upheld my end of the bargain. I owe you nothing else."

"Of course, darling." Leanansidhe smiled at him. "You've done a marvelous job. So, if you would just set her down there, dove, my servants will take her off your hands."

Ash didn't release the girl. I felt him hesitate, then take a furtive breath. "Now," he continued in a quiet voice, "what will it take for you to let her go?"

"What?" Leanansidhe blinked, staring at the Winter prince, who faced her calmly. "*What* did you say, pet? I'm not quite sure I heard you correctly."

I quickly stepped up beside him.

"She's a kid, Lea." The Exile Queen spun on me, bristling like an enraged cougar. "You can't keep her like this. She has a family, somewhere. She needs to go home."

"*I* am her home, pet." Leanansidhe swelled indignantly, her copper-gold hair whipping madly around her. "And the girl belongs to me! Ash, darling." She glanced at the Winter prince. "I cannot believe this. Your own queen does far worse to the humans in her court. And you—I know what *you* have done to mortals over the years, you and Goodfellow both! How dare you judge me? Have you gone soft, darlings? Have you forgotten that we are fey?"

Jeez, pissing off two volatile faery queens in one day. We must hold some kind of record. I stepped up before Lea could turn Ash into a harpsichord.

"Not at all," I said quickly, smiling in the face of the enraged Exile Queen. "Calm down, Lea. It's not like we're going to take the kid and run. We're prepared to offer a trade."

Leanansidhe calmed somewhat. "A trade, darling?" she mused, feigning disinterest, though I knew she was curious. She couldn't help it; it was part of our nature. "And what, may I ask, could you possibly offer for the girl's freedom? The price will be high, my pet, just so you know. The girl is one of my favorites, after all. I'm afraid that your offer will have to be quite—"

I reached into my shirt and held up a mirror, letting it flash in the sun. A small, golden hand mirror, with jeweled flowers around the rim and silver vines curled around the handle. It sang as I brought it out, a sweet, piercing note that made all the nearby birds start chirping and drew a curious pair of deer out of the forest.

Leanansidhe's eyes went wide. "That…that is…" She blinked at me, astonished, then threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, Robin, you naughty, brilliant boy. You *did* take it, after all. How in the world did you manage?"

"That," I said, "is a very long story. One that should be told another time." I tossed the mirror in the air and caught it again, holding it out to Leanansidhe. "So, Lea, do we have a trade, or not?"

"Take the girl back to her family, pet." Leanansidhe plucked the mirror from my hand with obvious delight. "I found her in some tiny little town in the Ozarks. She can probably tell you where she lives…I haven't had her for very long. In any case, I believe our business here is concluded."

"One more thing, if you would." Ash stepped forward before the Exile Queen could depart. "Grimalkin. We need to find him. You said you knew where he was."

"No, pet." Leanansidhe admired herself in the mirror's surface, pleased as a full cat. "I said I could perhaps point you in the right direction."

"And what direction would that be?"

Leanansidhe tore her gaze away from the mirror, smiling at us. "Well, darlings," she said, waving an airy hand, "there is a trio of witches who live somewhere in the Wraithwood. I would start there. It is as good a

place as any. Now, my pets, I really must dash. I have a violin to replace. Good luck finding Grimalkin. If you do manage to catch up to the devious creature, be a dear and tell him I said hello. *Ciao*, darlings!"

A swirl of glitter and light, and we were alone.

Ash sighed. "The Wraithwood," he said, shifting the girl into a more comfortable position. She mumbled and snored in his arms. "That's… unfortunate. I was hoping we'd never have to go back."

I grinned at him. "What, you mean because of the ogre tribe we pissed off, or the giant dead god we accidentally woke up?"

"*You* accidentally woke up."

"Details." I waved my hand. "So, are we going to get this adventure started, or what?"

Ash shook his head, but I saw the shadow of a smirk on his face. "You know I'm probably going to kill you soon, right?" he muttered as we headed off into the trees.

"Old news, ice-boy." I chuckled, falling into step beside him. "And you know I wouldn't miss it for the world."

* * * * *

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TALON
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Julie Kagawa was born in Sacramento, California. But nothing exciting really happened to her there. So, at the age of nine she and her family moved to Hawaii, which she soon discovered was inhabited by large carnivorous insects, colonies of house geckos and frequent hurricanes. She spent much of her time in the ocean, when she wasn't getting chased out of it by reef sharks, jellyfish and the odd eel.

To pay the rent, Julie worked in different bookstores over the years, but discovered the managers frowned upon her reading the books she was supposed to be shelving. So she turned to her other passion: training animals. She worked as a professional dog trainer for several years, dodging Chihuahua bites and overly enthusiastic Labradors, until her first book sold and she stopped training to write full-time.

Julie now lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where the frequency of shark attacks are at an all-time low. She lives with her husband, two obnoxious cats, one Australian shepherd who is too smart for his own good and the latest addition, a hyperactive papillon.

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Alpha was halfway up the lawn when the roof exploded.

Something dark, scaly and massive erupted from the hacienda, sending tile and wood flying as it launched itself into the air. It was huge, a full-grown adult, the height of a bull elephant and three times as long. Curved horns spiraled up from its narrow skull, and a mane of spines ran down its neck to a long, thrashing tail. The sun glinted off midnight scales, and leathery wings cast a long shadow over the ground as the dragon hovered in the air a moment, glaring down at the battle below, then dove to attack.

Wings flared, it landed on the lawn with a roar that shook the earth, and sent a cone of flame blasting through the ranks of soldiers. Bodies fell away, screaming, flailing, as hellish dragonfire consumed armor and flesh like tinder. The dragon pounced, scything through the ranks with its claws, crushing soldiers in its teeth before flinging them away. Its tail whipped out, striking an entire group coming up behind it and knocking them aside like bowling pins.

Now! I leaped to my feet, as did the rest of my squad, and opened fire on the huge reptile. The M16s chattered in sharp, three-round bursts, and I aimed carefully for the dragon's side, behind the front foreleg where the heart would be. Blood erupted along the armored hide, and the dragon screamed as some of the shots hit home, though not enough to kill it. It staggered, and I pressed forward grimly, concentrating fire on its weak points. If we could kill it quickly, the less damage it could do, and the fewer lives it would take. There could be no hesitation on our part; it was either us, or the dragon.

Directly across from us, a black jeep with a mounted .50 caliber Browning M2 burst from the bushes, and machine gun fire joined the cacophony as the vehicle sped toward the dragon. Caught in a deadly crossfire, the dragon roared. Bounding away, it opened its leathery wings and launched itself into the air with a powerful downward thrust.

"Aim for the wings!" the commander barked in my ear, though I was already switching targets, methodically firing at the sweeping membranes. "Bring it down now! Don't let it fly away."

But the dragon had no intention of fleeing. Roaring, it turned and swooped from the sky, dropping fifteen tons of scales, teeth and claws onto its target. It smashed full force into the jeep, halting its momentum, crushing the hood and causing the driver to fly into the windshield. The gunner flew from the back, tumbling to the ground and sprawling limply in the ferns. With a triumphant bellow, the dragon overturned the whole vehicle, crushing metal and glass and turning the jeep into a mangled wreck. I winced inside, but there was no time to think on the lives lost. We would pay our respects to the fallen when the battle was won.

My squad switched fire back to the dragon's flank. Streaked with blood, the dragon jerked, and that long neck snapped around, a murderous gleam in its red eyes as it glared in our direction.

"Hold position!" I snapped to the rest of my squad, as the dragon roared a challenge and spun, tail lashing. "I'll draw it off. Keep firing!"

I left my hiding place and started forward, firing short, controlled bursts as I did, heading around the dragon's side. Spotting me, the dragon reared its head back and took a breath, and my pulse spiked. I dove away as fire erupted from its jaws, searing into the jungle and setting the trees ablaze. Rolling to my feet, I looked up to see the huge lizard coming for me, jaws gaping

wide. My heart pounded, but my hands remained steady as I raised my gun and fired at the horned skull, knowing the thick breastplate would protect its chest and stomach. The dragon flinched, shaking its head as the shots struck its bony brow and cheekbones, and kept coming.

I threw myself to the side as the dragon's head shot forward, jaws snapping shut in the spot I had been. Quick as a snake, it whipped its neck around and lunged again, teeth that could shear through a telephone pole coming right at me. I avoided the six-inch fangs, but the massive, horned head still crashed into my side, and even through the combat vest, pain erupted through my ribs. The ground fell away as the force hurled me into the air, the world spinning around me, and I rolled several paces when I struck the earth again. Clenching my jaw, I pushed myself to my elbows and looked up...

...into the crimson eyes of my enemy.

The dragon loomed overhead, dark and massive, its wings partially open to cast a huge shadow over the ground. I looked up, gazing into its ancient, alien face, saw myself reflected in those cold red eyes that held no mercy, no pity or understanding; just raw hate and savage triumph. It took a breath, nostrils flaring, and I braced myself for the killing flames. There was no fear, no remorse. I was a soldier of St. George; to die honorably in battle against our oldest foe was all I could hope for.

A single shot rang out from somewhere in the jungle, the sharp report echoing loudly even in the chaos. The dragon jerked and lurched sideways with a roar, a bright spray of blood erupting from its side, as the armor-piercing .50 caliber sniper round struck right behind its foreleg, straight into the heart. The precision-perfect shot that Tristan St. Anthony was known for. The blow knocked the dragon off its feet, and the ground shook as it finally collapsed. Wailing, it struggled to rise, clawing at the ground, wings and tail thrashing desperately. But it was dying, its struggles growing weaker even as the soldiers continued to pump it full of rounds. From where I lay, I watched its head hit the ground with a thump, watched its struggles grow weaker and weaker, until it was almost still. Only the faint, labored rise and fall of its ribs, and the frantic twitch of its tail, showed it was still clinging to life.

As it lay there, gasping, it suddenly rolled its eye back and looked at me, the slitted, bright red pupil staring up from the dirt. For a moment, we stared at each other, dragon and slayer, caught in an endless cycle of war and death.

I bowed my head, still keeping the dragon in my sights, and murmured, "*In nomine Domini Sabaoth, sui filiiqui ite ad Infernos.*" In the name of the Lord of Hosts and his son, depart to hell. An incantation taught to all soldiers, from when they'd believed dragons were demons and might possess you in a final attempt to remain in the world. I knew better. Dragons were flesh and blood; get past their scales and armor, and they died just like anything else. But they were also warriors, brave in their own way, and every warrior deserved a final send off.

A low rumble came from the dying dragon. Its jaws opened, and a deep, inhuman voice emerged through the screams and gunfire. "Do not think you have won, St. George," it rasped, glaring at me in disdain. "I am but a single scale in the body of TALON. We will endure, as we always have, and we grow stronger even as your race destroys itself from within. You, and all your kind, will fall before us. Soon."

Then the light behind the crimson orbs dimmed. The dragon's lids closed, its head dropped to the ground, and its whole body shuddered. With a last spasm, the wings stilled, the tail beating the earth ceased, and the huge reptile went limp as it finally gave up its fight for life.

I slumped, collapsing to my back in the dirt, as cheers rose around me. Soldiers began emerging from the trees, shaking their weapons and letting out victory cries. Beyond the massive corpse, bodies from both sides lay scattered about the lawn, some stirring weakly, some charred to blackened husks. Flames still flickered through the trees, black columns of smoke billowing into the sky. The crumpled remains of the jeep smoldered in the middle of the field, testament to the awesome power of the huge reptile.

The firefight with the guards had ceased. Now that their master was gone, the last of the enemy was fleeing into the jungle. No orders were given to track them down; we already had what we'd come for. In a few minutes, another crew would chopper in, clean up the debris, raze the hacienda, and make all the bodies disappear. No one would ever know that a monstrous, fire-breathing creature of legend died here this afternoon.

I looked at the lifeless dragon, crumpled in the dirt while the squads milled around its body and grinned and slapped each other on the back. A few soldiers approached the huge carcass, shaking their heads at the size, disgust and awe written on their faces. I stayed where I was. It was not the first dead dragon I'd seen, though it was the largest I'd ever fought. It would not be the last. I wondered, very briefly, if there would ever be a "last."

Dragons are evil; that was what every soldier of St. George was taught. *They are demons. Wyrms of the devil. Their final goal is the enslavement of the human race, and we are the only ones standing between them and the ignorant.*

While I wasn't certain about the entire *wyrms of the devil* part, our enemy certainly was strong, cunning and savage. I'd fought enough battles, seen enough of what they could do, to know they were ruthless. Merciless. Inhuman. Their power was vast, and they only got stronger with age. Thankfully, there weren't many ancient dragons in the world anymore, or at least, most of our battles were against smaller, younger dragons. To take down this huge, powerful adult was an enormous victory for our side. I felt no remorse in killing the beast; this dragon was a central figure in the South American cartels, responsible for the deaths of thousands. The world was a better place with it gone.

My ribs gave a sharp, painful throb, and I gritted my teeth. Now that the adrenaline had worn off and the fight was done, I turned my attention to my injury. My combat vest had absorbed a good bit of the damage, but judging from the pain in my side, the force of the blow had still cracked a rib or two.

"Well, that was amusing. If you ever get tired of the soldier life, maybe you should consider a career as a dragon soccer ball. You flew nearly twenty feet on that last hit."

I raised my head as a mound of weeds and moss melted out of the undergrowth, shuffling to my side. It carried a Barrett M107A1 .50 caliber sniper rifle in one shaggy limb, and the other reached up to tug back its hood, revealing a smirking, dark-haired soldier four years my senior, his eyes so blue they were almost black.

"You okay?" Tristan St. Anthony asked, crouching down beside me. His ghillie suit rustled as he shrugged out of it, setting it and the rifle carefully aside. "Anything broken?"

"No" I gritted out, setting my jaw as pain stabbed through me. "I'm fine. Nothing serious, it's just a cracked rib or two." I breathed cautiously as the commander emerged from the trees, slowly making his way toward us. I watched him bark orders to the other squads, point at the dragon and the bodies scattered about, and struggled carefully upright. The medic would be here in a few minutes, taking stock of the wounded, seeing who could be saved. I glanced at Tristan. "Killing shot goes to you, then, doesn't it? How big was the pot this time?"

"Three hundred. You'd think they'd figure it out by now." Tristan didn't bother hiding the smugness in his voice. Glancing over, he gave me an appraising look. "Though I guess I should give you a portion, since you were the one who set it up."

"Don't I always?" Tristan and I had been partners awhile now, ever since I turned fourteen and joined the real missions, three years ago. He'd lost his first partner to dragonfire, and hadn't been pleased with the notion of "babysitting a kid," despite the fact that he was only eighteen himself. His tune changed when, on our first assignment together, I'd saved him from an ambush, nearly gotten myself killed, and managed to shoot the enemy before it could slaughter us both. Now, three years and dozens of battles later, I couldn't imagine having someone else at my back. We'd saved each other's lives so often, we'd both lost count.

“Still.” Tristan shifted to one knee, grinning faintly. “You’re my partner, you nearly got yourself eaten, and you might’ve set a world record for distance in being head-butted by a dragon. You deserve something.” Tristan nodded, then dug in his pocket and flourished a ten-dollar bill. “Here you go, partner. Don’t spend it all in one place.”

* * * * *

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